

Rural Hunger in America

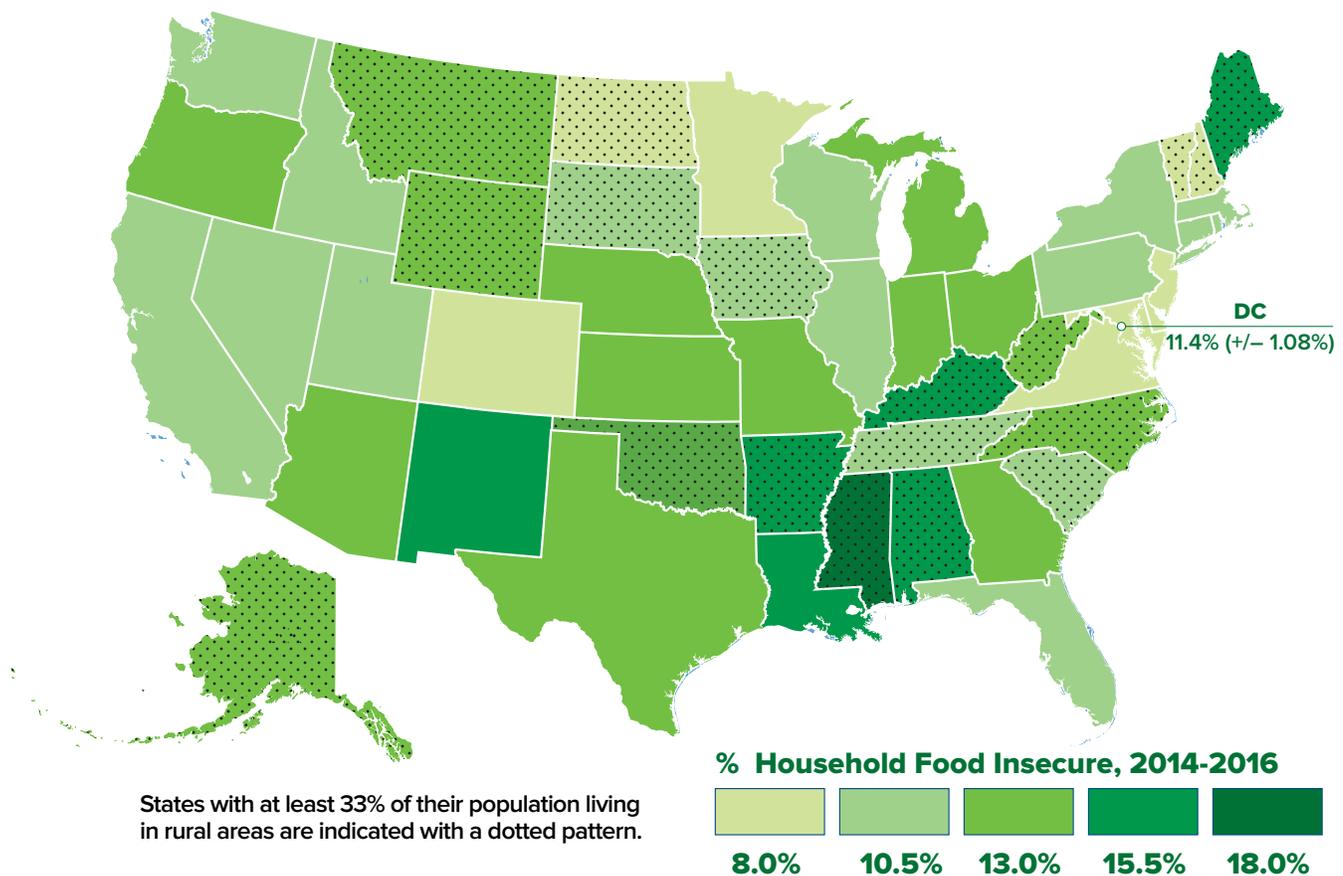
GET THE FACTS

No community in America is immune to hunger, including rural areas. Paradoxically, in rural areas that grow most of our nation's food, households face considerably deeper struggles with hunger than those in metropolitan areas. Millions of working families, veterans, people with disabilities, seniors, and children in rural communities cannot always afford and access enough food for an active, healthy life. This struggle against hunger is known as food insecurity.

Food insecurity in rural areas:

- detrimentally impacts the health, productivity, and well-being of people — especially children and seniors;
- increases health care utilization and costs; and
- undermines the economies and the sustainability of rural communities.

Percentage of Food Insecure Households: How Rural States Fare



Source: Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. 2017. Household Food Security in the United States in 2016, ERR-237, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Did You Know? Food Insecurity is Worse in Rural America Than in Urban America

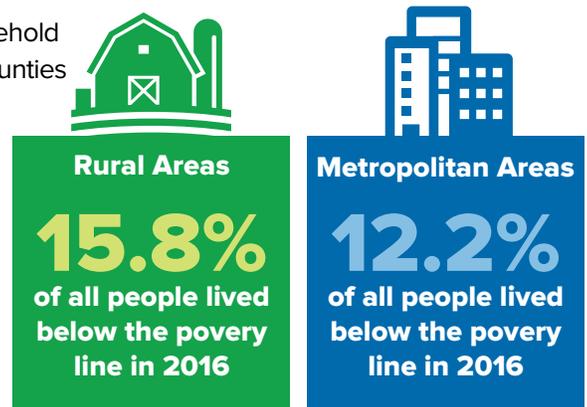
Rural households are more likely to experience food insecurity than households in metropolitan areas.



Did You Know? Poverty is Worse in Rural America Than in Urban America

Poverty is the root cause of hunger and is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. Rural wages, on average, are lower, and work-support services (public transportation and child care) are unavailable or harder to find and access in rural America.

The median household income in rural counties was \$45,830, just 74.5 percent of the median income for households in metropolitan counties (\$61,521).



Health Outcomes are Worse in Rural America Than in Urban America

Food insecurity is linked to a wide range of negative health outcomes. Rural Americans are at higher risk for poor health outcomes than their urban counterparts.

A growing body of research focuses specifically on the harmful impacts of food insecurity on the health of rural Americans:

- Food insecurity was linked to poorer health, less exercise, and lower grades in a recent study of rural adolescents in Minnesota.
- Rural single mothers in the South experiencing food insecurity were more likely to be in poor/fair health and more likely to be depressed than their food-secure counterparts.
- Residents of rural communities, especially children, have higher rates of overweight and obesity, compared to those living in urban areas.

Higher rates of poverty, less access to health care, and lower rates of health-promoting behaviors (e.g., physical activity, seat belt use) fuel health disparities.

In addition, residents of rural communities, especially low-income residents, face obstacles — limited access to grocery stores, availability of healthful, affordable foods, and substantial travel distances and costs — that make it harder to shop for food.

What We Can Do

The federal nutrition programs — the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), child care meals, school breakfast and lunch, afterschool meals and snacks, summer food, and home-delivered meals — are the nation's first line of defense against hunger and reach millions of rural residents every day. The programs could — and should — reach millions more rural families in need of nutritious food.

Increasing access to these programs not only provides a sustainable strategy for rural areas to reduce hunger and improve nutrition, but also helps rural communities decrease poverty, support working families, and stimulate the local economy. All of the programs, except WIC and home-delivered meals, are federal entitlements. As such, these programs can expand to serve any child who meets the program criteria and do not need annual federal appropriations. While WIC is not an entitlement program,

there is still substantial room to grow participation in the program, especially among children ages one to five.

The benefits of these programs — particularly for children — are immense. Here are just a few examples:

- SNAP benefits lift millions of Americans above the poverty line, including 3.6 million people in 2016 alone.
- Extensive research shows that SNAP improves food security, dietary intake, and health, especially among children, and with lasting effects.
- The school lunch and breakfast programs reduce hunger and obesity, lift children out of poverty, reduce school nurse visits, and improve attendance, student behavior, and educational achievement.
- The summer food and afterschool food programs boost nutrition and attract hungry children to school-based and community-based programs that keep them safe and engaged, provide positive activities, and reduce obesity.
- The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) improves preschoolers' nutrition, reduces obesity, strengthens the quality of early care, and helps boost and stabilize caregivers' incomes and services.
- The participation of women, infants, and young children in the WIC program improves rates of prenatal care, reduces low birth weight and infant mortality, and reduces childhood anemia and obesity.
- The senior nutrition programs help seniors improve their nutrition and health and reduce the need for more costly medical interventions.

The federal food dollars available for these programs stimulate rural economies through assistance that goes directly to struggling families, schools, child care and senior centers, and community and faith-based organizations. Those funds are then spent in local communities and typically are spent quickly by the struggling beneficiaries. As studies by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and others have shown, every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in local economic activity, helping to create jobs and expand markets for farmers.



The federal nutrition programs also make child-serving programs viable, helping rural areas to provide more work supports for families who need child care. A child care center caring for 50 low-income young children could receive up to \$70,000 per year in federal CACFP funds to serve breakfast, lunch, and a snack to each child each weekday. A summer program serving 100 children could potentially receive up to \$22,500 per summer in Summer Food Service Program funds to serve lunch and breakfast to each child each weekday. Federal funding for meals frees up funds previously spent on food to be used for other purposes, such as hiring more staff, purchasing needed materials, or paying for transportation.

By improving access to these federal nutrition programs, rural America can take significant and lasting steps to address the devastating economic and health risks of food insecurity and ensure that all families can access the healthy food necessary to fuel their learning, well-being, and productivity.

This fact sheet is part of a series on rural hunger developed by the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) with the support of Smithfield Foods. FRAC and Smithfield Foods have teamed up to create the Rally Against Rural Hunger initiative to raise awareness about rural hunger and to connect eligible people across the country with federal food assistance programs so they may get the nutrition they need for their health and well-being.