Food Insecurity and Poverty in the United States:
Findings from the USDA and U.S. Census Bureau

Despite decreasing poverty rates and a slowly rising median income, millions of families and individuals continue to earn low incomes and experience concern about affording a sufficient amount of quality food throughout the year.

In 2017, nearly 40 million people in the U.S. earned incomes less than the poverty line. In addition, 40 million people, nearly 1 in 8, live in households with limited access to adequate food during the year due to lack of money and other resources. Among the 40 million, more than 12 million are children.

Below large national figures lie a variety of experiences of Americans who either find a living wage out of reach or face systemic barriers to achieving income stability and food security. Of note:

- The poverty rate among people with a disability remains high at 2 times the national rate.
- For 4 years, rural food insecurity among households has remained higher than urban rates (in 2017, 13.3% compared to 11.5%).
- Households with children led by single women continue to experience food insecurity at 2.5 times the average household rate.

In the following pages, we share highlights from the recent USDA and Census Bureau reports about the current state of poverty and food insecurity in the U.S.
Food Insecurity

A household being unable to afford sufficient, quality food correlates with experiences of unemployment and poverty.

Participation in programs designed to address hunger, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps), rises in response to food insecurity.

Since 2014, poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity have declined each year. Economic improvement among households over the past 4 years also correlates with a reduced participation in SNAP.

Although food insecurity has declined since the recession, it has not returned to pre-recession lows. Similarly, while SNAP participation remains high, it can have a protective effect for households and may contribute to preventing further food insecurity.

When looking across racial groups or regions, additional disparities emerge. For example, although half of food-insecure households are White, they represent 1 in 11 White households in the U.S. compared to nearly 1 in 5 African American and 1 in 6 Latino households who are food insecure.

Half of food-insecure households represent people of color

- White, non-Hispanic: 24%
- African American, non-Hispanic: 21%
- Hispanic: 50%
- Other race: 6%

More than 40% of food-insecure households live in the south

- Northeast: 22%
- Midwest: 15%
- South: 43%
- West: 15%

- Due to rounding, estimates may not total 100%
In 2017, U.S. households experienced a 1.8% increase in median income ($61,372), the third consecutive increase since the Great Recession.

Although median income is rising, millions of people remain food insecure, balancing competing housing, healthcare, transportation, and food costs.

The poverty level – a mere $25,100 for a family of four – illustrates how people with incomes above the poverty line may still face material hardship.

In fact, **10 million food-insecure people have incomes too high to be eligible for any federal nutrition assistance, such as SNAP or WIC.**

**Who lives in poverty in the United States?**

People living in poverty are disproportionately children, people living with a disability, or withstanding high medical expenditures.

- **4 M** people with a disability
- **13 M** children under 18
- **11 M** people after including medical expenses

**Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM): An improved understanding of household hardship and the programs that protect from poverty**

Census Bureau researchers have designed an alternative approach to measuring poverty by incorporating the benefit received through programs like Social Security, earned income and child tax credits, and SNAP. It also includes the impact of critical expenses such as medical and child care against a household’s disposable budget.

**Following the SPM...**

- **Social Security prevented**
  - **27 million** people from living below the poverty line.
- **EITC and child tax credits precluded**
  - **8 million**
- **SNAP benefits stopped**
  - **3 million**

**Food insecurity and poverty are not always experienced by the same families**

- **40 million** people live in households with concern about affording sufficient food
- **39.7 million** people earn incomes that put them below the poverty line

Among them, **59%** earn incomes above poverty*

Yet **61%** report being food secure

*Among food insecure households whose income is known.
Implications

As evidenced by the USDA and U.S. Census Bureau’s recent research, millions of families and individuals in the U.S. continue to earn low incomes and worry about whether they can provide sufficient food for themselves and their loved ones.

Findings suggest that strong federal programs – including earned tax credits, SNAP, Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and more – can protect families from further income instability.

These programs, as well as the charitable sector, continue to weave a protective net for struggling families and individuals across the country. It is imperative to maintain the strength of these support systems to continue to fight poverty and food insecurity in communities nationwide.

Our recommendations include:

- Maintain the strength of protective federal programs and maximize participation among eligible people (e.g. seniors)
- Strive to serve high-need and disinvested communities, including single parents and communities of color
- Connect people with opportunities to build household stability, including enrolling in health insurance, connecting with healthcare partners through cross-sector partnerships, and building financial security, in accessible and novel means.

References


Other Resources

- For county-level food insecurity estimates, see Feeding America’s annual [Map the Meal Gap](#) study.
- For state-level food insecurity estimates among seniors, see Feeding America’s recent [State of Senior Hunger](#) study.
- To learn more about charitable food distribution efforts in your community, [Find Your Local Food Bank](#).