

Map the Meal Gap 2024

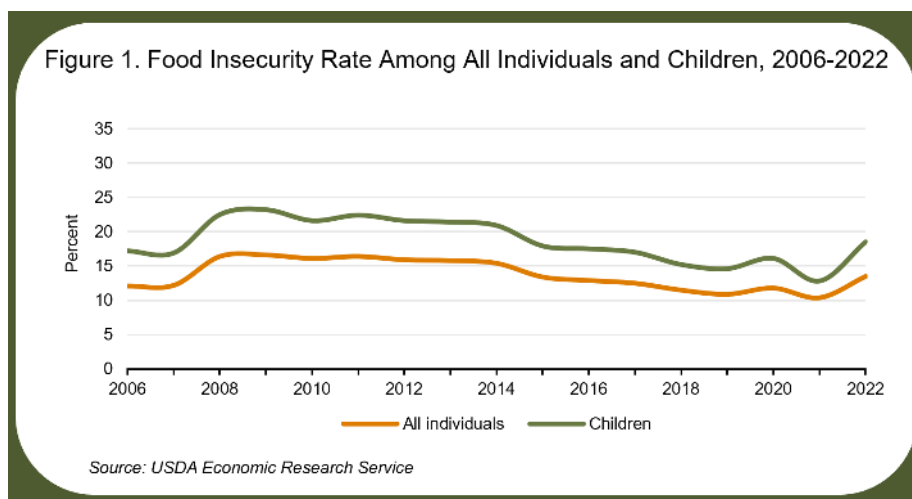
A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2022



WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life due to limited financial resources. The USDA reported that in 2022, the most recent year of data available, the overall food insecurity rate increased sharply, rising from 10.4% in 2021 to 13.5% in 2022. The change reflects the largest one-year increase since 2008, and the rate, which amounts to over 44 million people, or 1 in every 7, is the highest it has been since 2014.ⁱ

Recent trends in food insecurity levels and the strengthening and subsequent weakening of safety net programs tell a story about how policies and programs can help people weather the storm during times of crisis. In response to the economic downturn that began at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and local support programs expanded, and for a period of two years food insecurity levels were stable or declined. As pandemic programs ended and prices for household expenses (including food) rose, food insecurity levels have also risen. Figure 1 shows trends in food insecurity levels among all individuals and children from 2006 through 2022.



Food insecurity is a symptom of historical and structural oppression, not individual weakness. It does not exist in a vacuum: people who face challenges accessing enough food also face challenges affording adequate housing, healthcare, transportation, and other basic needs. Food insecurity is a complex issue that will not be solved with a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, effective solutions to food insecurity should be informed by a deep understanding of individuals and families experiencing food insecurity and where they live.

ABOUT THE STUDY

While national data can help tell a broad story about food insecurity in the United States, experiences differ by population and place. Since 2011, Feeding America has conducted *Map the Meal Gap* to continue to improve our understanding of how food insecurity and food costs can vary at the local level. We estimate the number of people

and children experiencing food insecurity in every county and congressional district in the country. Beginning in 2022, we now include estimates of food insecurity for several racial and ethnic identities, which can serve as additional input into understanding the repercussions of racism and structural oppression in the U.S. We also estimate the percentage of people who are food insecure and unlikely to qualify for federal nutrition assistance programs based on their incomes. Finally, we provide data on how much additional money the food insecure population reports needing to buy just enough food, and how food prices vary at the state and county level. By better understanding variations in local need, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people experiencing food insecurity.

To accurately estimate local food insecurity in every county and congressional district in the United States, we use publicly available local data that research has shown to be associated with food insecurity, including unemployment, poverty, homeownership, disability status, and median income. Together, these factors provide a more complete picture of a community’s potential need for food assistance than any one variable can alone. For example, prior to *Map the Meal Gap*, local poverty rates were often used as a proxy for local food insecurity. However, national USDA data reveals that 66% of food-insecure people earn more than the federal poverty level, and 38% of people living in poverty are food secure.

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. To access complete information about *Map the Meal Gap*, including the interactive map, methodological details available in a technical report, project acknowledgements, and more, visit map.feedingamerica.org.

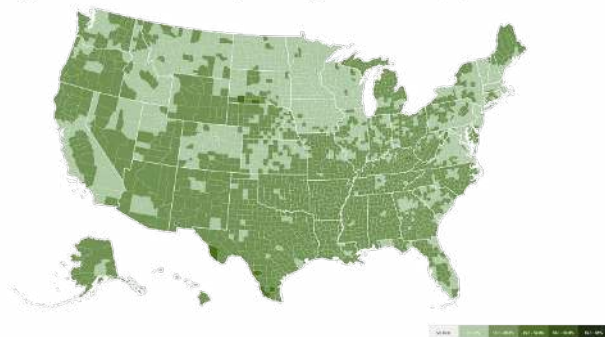
WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

FOOD INSECURITY

As it has every year, *Map the Meal Gap* shows that **100% of counties and congressional districts are home to people facing hunger** (see Figure 2). On average, food insecurity is approximately 13% across all counties and districts, consistent with the 13.5% of all individuals in food-insecure households as of 2022 reported by the USDA. Yet, levels of food insecurity vary by population and place. Nationally, the percentage of the overall population estimated to be food insecure ranges from a low of 6% in Renville County, North Dakota, to 29% in Oglala Lakota County, South Dakota. 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.

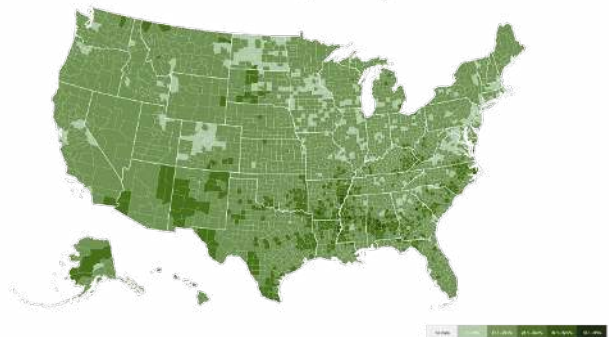
Child food insecurity also exists in every community, and rates reach nearly 50% in some counties (see Figure 3). While the USDA reports that 18.5% (1 in 5) of children in the U.S. may experience food insecurity, estimated rates reach as high as 48% (1 in 2) in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. Food insecurity is also estimated to be more prevalent among children than it is among the total population in every state and in more than 9 out of 10 counties (2,988 out of 3,144). Research demonstrates links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes at every age, underscoring the economic and social imperative to address this issue.

Figure 2. Food insecurity among the overall population in 2022



Source: Feeding America

Figure 3. Food insecurity among children in 2022

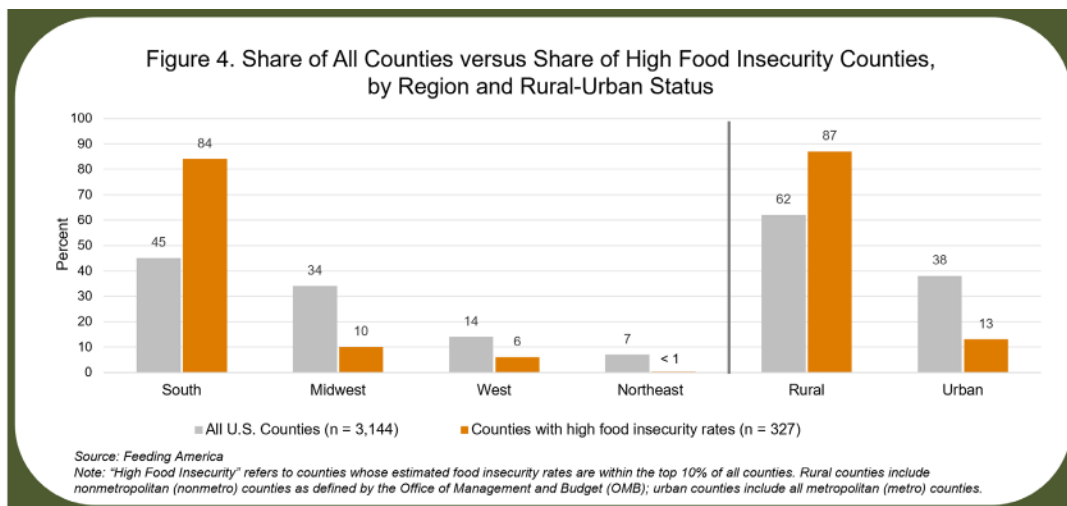


Food insecurity in the South

8 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are in the South. The South contains 45% of all counties but is home to an estimated 84% of counties with food-insecurity rates in the top 10% (274 of 327). (See Figure 4). When looking across regions, 1 in 5 (19.3%) counties in the South are estimated to have high food insecurity, compared to 1 in 22 (4.5%) in the West and 1 in 33 (3.0%) in the Midwest. Bronx County, New York, is the only county in the Northeast that appears in the top 10%. These regional disparities are consistent with national data from the USDA, which also show that individual food insecurity rates are highest in the South (15.6% as compared to 13.0% in the Midwest, 11.7% in the West, and 11.7% in the Northeast).

Food insecurity in rural communities

9 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are rural. While the majority (87%) of people in the U.S. live inside metropolitan (urban) areas and most people experiencing food insecurity live in urban areas (85%, or 37.4 million out of 44.2 million), the counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are disproportionately rural. Rural counties (those outside of major metropolitan areas) make up 62% of all counties but represent 87% of counties with food insecurity rates in the top 10% (285 out of 327). (See Figure 4).

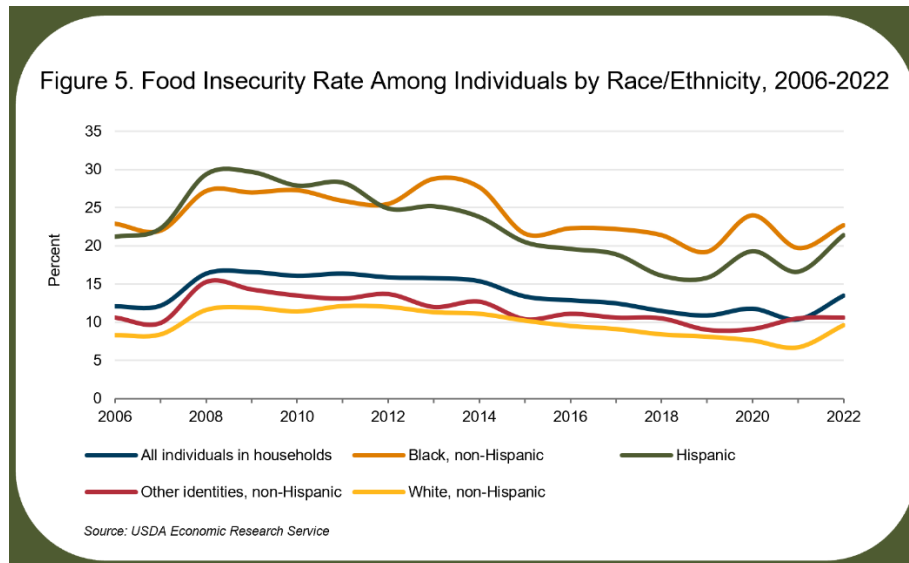


Food insecurity and income

Nearly 50% of people facing hunger are unlikely to qualify for SNAP. Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest food assistance program, are the first line of defense against hunger, yet many people who are food insecure have incomes or assets that are too high to qualify for these critical benefits. Income eligibility thresholds for SNAP range from 130% to 200% of the federal poverty line, which is only \$40,560 to \$62,400 for a family of four as of January 2024. Estimates produced through *Map the Meal Gap* suggest that 21 million or 47% of individuals experiencing food insecurity may not be eligible for SNAP. These estimates account for state-specific gross income limits (not asset requirements), and vary by state, from 38% in Kentucky to 75% in Utah. While there are some counties where the full food insecure population likely qualifies for SNAP (0% ineligible), the share of people experiencing food insecurity who are likely ineligible for the program is estimated to be as high as 89% in Morgan County, Utah. The quantity of households that experience food insecurity and do not qualify for SNAP further underscores the importance of charitable food assistance. While these findings only reflect SNAP income eligibility, not everyone who qualifies for SNAP is enrolled, highlighting the need to both protect and strengthen federal nutrition programs, and increase enrollment.

FOOD INSECURITY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

The prevalence of food insecurity can vary widely for different racial and ethnic populations. A long history of structural racism and 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. The figure to the right displays food insecurity levels for select racial and ethnic groups from 2006 through 2022, based on data published each year by the USDA.



For the third consecutive year, *Map the Meal Gap* includes estimates of local food insecurity for Black individuals, Latino individuals, and white, non-Hispanic individuals. The inclusion of these estimates serves as an additional input to our understanding of disparities in food insecurity within and across communities.

Disparities within counties

Food insecurity among Black or Latino individuals is higher than white individuals in more than 9 out of 10 counties with comparable data. Among Latinos, the disparity compared to white individuals reaches as high as 40 percentage points in Newton County, Texas (53% vs. 13%). For Black individuals, this discrepancy can be especially stark – for instance, in Cumberland County, Tennessee, the gap is as wide as 51 percentage points (65% vs. 13%). Moreover, in three of four counties (846 out of 1,107), estimated food insecurity among Black individuals exceeds that of Latinos, with disparities as high as 38 percentage points in Cumberland County, Tennessee (65% vs. 27%). The disparities noted above are an example of how historical, social, economic, and environmental factors have disadvantaged many communities of color, creating barriers to food security. Such findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address persistent and significant racial disparities in food security across the United States.

Variation across counties

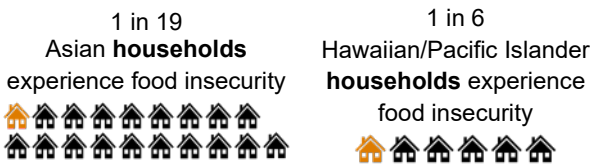
County food insecurity varies by as much as 59 percentage points for some racial/ethnic groups. According to national data from the USDA, the average food insecurity rate among Black, non-Hispanic individuals and Latino individuals is nearly 23% and more than 21%, respectively, while the rate among white, non-Hispanic individuals is nearly 10%. *Map the Meal Gap* helps to show how the risk of hunger varies by race and place. Estimated food insecurity rates among Black individuals range from 6% in Broomfield County, Colorado to 65% in Cumberland County, Tennessee. Food insecurity rates among Latino individuals range from approximately 7% in Calvert County, Maryland to 53% in Newton County, Texas. Food insecurity rates among white, non-Hispanic individuals range from 2% in the District of Columbia to 29% in Wolfe County, Kentucky.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

The USDA's annual report on national food insecurity and Feeding America's annual *Map the Meal Gap* study on local food insecurity both provide food insecurity estimates for Black, Latino, and white individuals.¹ Estimates for additional racial and ethnic identities are not included in these and many other studies for reasons that include smaller population sizes or insufficient data collection processes that create barriers to deriving reliable estimates. The absence of these groups from study findings can mean these same populations are absent from the discussion of solutions.

In April 2024, the USDA released an extension of its annual report that includes household-level food insecurity estimates for a broader array of racial and ethnic identities by combining six years of data (2016-2021) from the Current Population Survey.ⁱⁱ The results from this new report, combined with data from the most recent USDA's annual food security report released in October 2023 (about 2022), show that there are even more dramatic variations in national food insecurity levels when different races and identities are further disaggregated.² Below we highlight insights from these two reports along with other available research that further helps to show how food insecurity and its drivers can vary for individuals and households of different races and ethnicities.

Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Individuals & Households



Source: USDA Economic Research Service, Average of 2016-2021 data

Additional research and insights: As indicated by the estimates above, food insecurity varies greatly within the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) community, a population that is both diverse and rapidly growing in the U.S. Assumptions that treat AANHPI populations as one large group lead to the variations in experiences and outcomes of unique communities being overlooked, under-researched, and underserved.^{iii, iv} While food insecurity among Asian Americans is lower than the national average, studies indicate that some nationalities, including those of Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese descent, experience food insecurity at higher rates.^{v, vi} Similarly, recent immigrants from some Asian or Pacific Island nations often face higher risks of hunger. For instance, 1 in 5 recent immigrants from Nepal and Afghanistan are estimated to experience food insecurity, based on data averaged from 2018-2022.^{vii}

Black Individuals & Households



Source: USDA Economic Research Service, 2022 data

Additional research and insights: As noted earlier, *Map the Meal Gap* data reveals that in nearly every county where comparable estimates are available, food insecurity among Black individuals exceeds that for white, non-Hispanic individuals, with county-level rates among Black individuals ranging from 6% in Broomfield County, Colorado to 65% in Cumberland County, Tennessee. Increased focus has been given to the role that discriminatory policies and systems play in racial inequities that keep communities food insecure. For example, according to the Federal Reserve Board, Black families' median wealth was approximately 15 percent that of white families (\$44,900 vs. \$285,000) in 2022.^{viii} Additional studies indicate that racial disparities exist even when factors such as income and education are taken into account, suggesting that pervasive racism in historical, political, cultural, and socioeconomic systems continues.^{ix, x}

Latino Individuals & Households

1 in 5
 Latino individuals
 experience food insecurity



Source: USDA Economic Research Service, 2022 data

Additional research and insights: As noted earlier, *Map the Meal Gap* data reveals that in nearly every county where comparable estimates are available, food insecurity among Latino individuals exceeds that for white, non-Hispanic individuals, with county-level rates among Latino individuals ranging from approximately 7% in Calvert County, Maryland, to 53% in Newton County, Texas. Evidence suggests that food insecurity within the Latino population tends to be more closely tied to the labor market and unemployment than overall food insecurity.^{xi,xii} Although this population is often perceived as a monolith, food insecurity among Latinos can vary substantially by characteristics like immigration status, length of time in the U.S., and country of origin.

Native American Individuals & Households

1 in 4
 Native American households
 experience food insecurity



Source: USDA Economic Research Service,
 Average of 2016-2021 data

Additional research and insights: Estimates from the USDA indicate Native Americans experience some of the highest rates of food insecurity, and other research suggests that the prevalence is even higher for some Native and Tribal communities. 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.^{xiii,xiv} Food insecurity among Native Americans was created through practices of colonization, including the forced relocation and assimilation of tribes and Native Communities, and persists today through policies that serve as barriers to food sovereignty.

White Individuals & Households

1 in 10
 white individuals
 experience food insecurity



Source: USDA Economic Research Service, 2022 data

Additional research and insights: While the food insecurity rate among white individuals for 2022 is lower than the national average of 13.5%, the number of white people experiencing food insecurity is significant, totaling more than 19 million or 44% of the food insecure population. Locally, the highest food insecurity estimates for white individuals are concentrated in rural areas in the South. For example, there are 60 counties in which food insecurity affects at least 1 in 5 white individuals, with 53 located in southern rural areas. Many of these counties are found in states with the highest rates of persistent poverty, which the USDA defines as at least 20% of the population living in poverty for more than 30 years.^{xv} Examples include Kentucky, West Virginia, and Louisiana. The confluence of complex challenges associated with persistent poverty, rural food access and food insecurity underscores the need for solutions that can effectively address both the immediate and long-term needs of food-insecure families living in these communities.

Improving data collection about race and ethnicity

In March 2024, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced new recommendations on how to collect and present federal data on race and ethnicity. The changes include combining separate questions on race and ethnicity into a single question, adding a new category: *Middle Eastern and North African*, and providing the option to select multiple races and ethnicities. These changes are expected to result in a more accurate representation of the growing diversity across the country, as research had indicated that too many people struggled to see themselves in the answer options to the previous questions. For additional details about the forthcoming changes, refer to [the OMB's announcement](#).

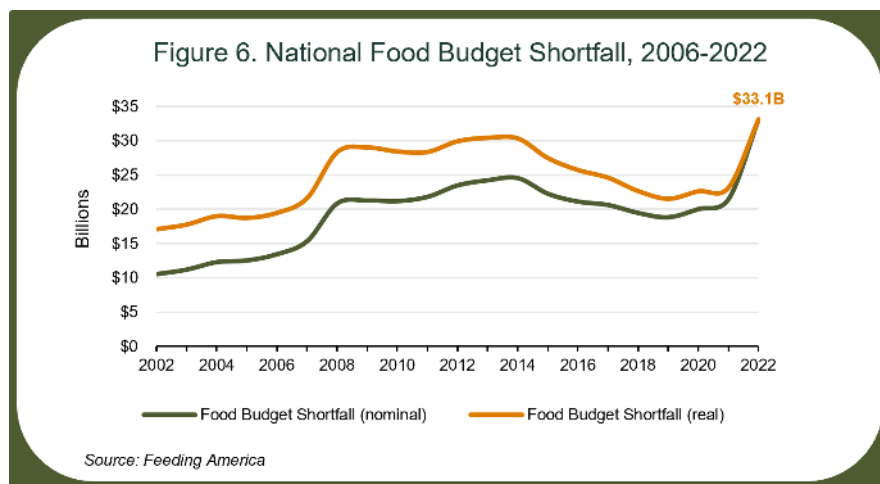
To further address gaps in data collection about communities of color, federal and state surveys must invest in adequately sampling and collecting food insecurity data that can be disaggregated in meaningful ways. This can only be done while addressing the fact that communities of color are often over researched (e.g. see [Chicago Beyond, Why am I always being researched?](#)). Consideration must be taken to protect personally 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.

FOOD BUDGET SHORTFALLS AND AVERAGE MEAL COSTS

In addition to estimating food insecurity by income across all counties and congressional districts, we also study how food prices vary across the country and estimate the level of need among people facing hunger.

Food budget shortfall

The national food budget shortfall swells to a record high of \$33.1 billion, a 43% increase. The total annual food budget shortfall reflects the additional dollars that food-insecure individuals report needing to have just enough money to cover their food needs. For 2022, this amounted to a historical high of \$33.1 billion, which is a real increase of nearly 43% over the 2021 shortfall (\$21.5 billion) and higher than the previous peak of \$24.6 billion in 2014 (\$30.4 billion in 2022 dollars). Even after adjusting for annual average inflation, the reported shortfall among people facing hunger in 2022 still increased by 9.5% compared to the previous year, reaching its highest point in the last two decades. This suggests that rising prices, especially food prices, likely contributed to the increase in this resource gap.



More about the food budget shortfall

The higher national shortfall in 2022 reflects an increase in both the number of individuals experiencing food insecurity (from 33.8 million in 2021 to 44.2 million in 2022) and the average additional dollar amount needed by food insecure individuals to have their food needs met (from \$20.91 per week in 2021 to \$24.73 per week in 2022). The calculation is visualized in Figure 7. Other components of the calculation include the cost of food index, 52 weeks (to annualize the weekly shortfall), and 7 out of 12 months (on average, households that were food insecure at some time throughout the year were food insecure in 7 months, according to the USDA).

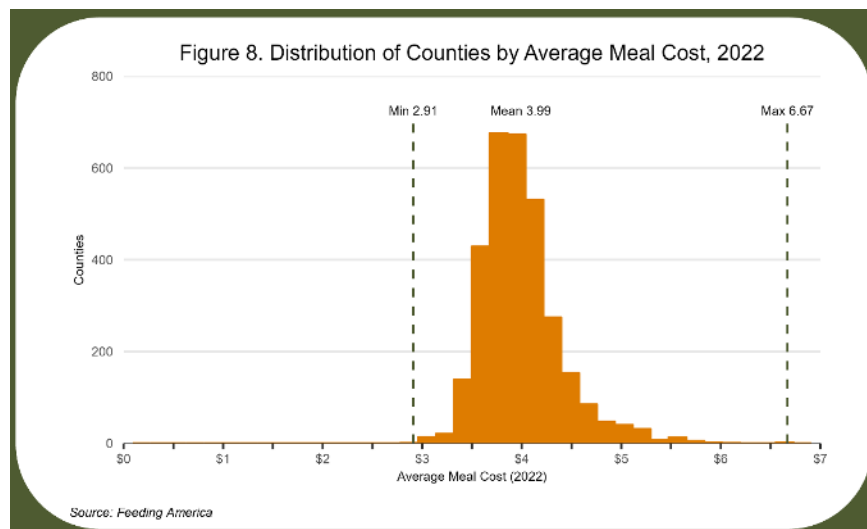
Figure 7. Food Budget Shortfall Reported by Food Insecure Individuals in 2022



Average Meal Costs

The national average cost per meal rises to \$3.99 in 2022. Individuals who were food secure reported spending an average of \$3.99 per meal, totaling \$83.79 per week or \$363.09 per month. Even after adjusting for annual average inflation, the national average cost per meal increased by nearly 3% compared to the previous year, reaching its highest point in the last two decades. To provide context, this reported amount is 1.6 times as high as the average individual cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (\$52.70 per week or \$228.50 per month as of December 2022), which serves as the basis for calculating the maximum SNAP benefit allotments by the USDA.

County meal costs range from \$2.91 to \$6.67. The average amount that a food-secure individual reports spending on food varies greatly by county. The average cost per meal ranges from 73% of the \$3.99 national average in Llano County, TX (\$2.91) to 167% in Leelanau County, MI (\$6.67), after accounting for county-level food prices and local sales taxes. As Figure 8 shows, more counties have meal costs above the average than below it, regardless of geographic location. Although the greatest number of people live in urban areas with higher costs of living, not all urban areas have high food prices, and not every rural community is affordable. For example, urban Pendleton and Gallatin counties in northern Kentucky, both part of the Cincinnati metropolitan area, have a relatively low estimated meal cost of \$3.27, while rural Leelanau County in Michigan is home to the highest meal cost in the country. For individuals struggling to afford housing, utilities, transportation, and other necessities, the additional burden of high food prices can have a significant impact on their household budget, wherever they may live.



WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS?

The findings from *Map the Meal Gap 2024* show that food insecurity continues to exist in every county and congressional district in the United States. As prices reached historically high levels and pandemic-era relief programs continued to end,³ food insecurity in 2022 rose by an average of more than 30% and reached levels not seen since 2014.^{xvi} Since 2022, food prices have remained elevated and more temporary federal nutrition policies have ended. As examples, SNAP emergency allotments that gave all households the maximum benefit ended in February 2023 in 35 states; the suspension of the three-month time limit on SNAP (for adults without kids) was lifted; and the WIC benefit increase (for fruits and vegetables) also expired. One study suggests that as a result, food insecurity increased for the second straight year in 2023, at least among adults.^{xvii}

While SNAP is the cornerstone of the federal nutrition programs and shown to be effective at improving food security, SNAP benefits did not cover the cost of a meal in 99 percent of counties in 2022.^{xviii} Furthermore, millions of people who are food insecure do not qualify for SNAP, and many turn to food banks to help fill the gap. Last year, Feeding America helped provide 5.2 billion meals to tens of millions of people in need. This direct work with communities depends upon the nutritious food provided by TEFAP, and it complements the vital assistance offered through SNAP.

Improved policies are critical to help people experiencing food insecurity get the food they need now, as well as to expand opportunity, enable economic mobility, and support financial well-being. Below are recommended policy changes that can help neighbors facing hunger have what is needed to thrive. For complete detail of policy recommendations inspired by the voices of people facing hunger, refer to Feeding America's latest [Elevating Voices Report](#).

Strengthen and expand access to SNAP

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit levels and purchasing power must be set at an adequate level and made to reflect modern dietary guidelines, evolving food consumption patterns and preparation practices, and food prices to ensure individuals and families can purchase enough nutritious foods.
- Access to SNAP should be improved and simplified, particularly for seniors, college students, veterans and military families, tribal communities, and others who do not qualify for or are unable to participate in SNAP due to eligibility and enrollment barriers, such as the Federal Drug Felon Ban.
- A pathway is needed for U.S. citizens in Puerto Rico to transition to full participation in SNAP.

Simplify and improve access to other grocery, commodity, and child nutrition programs

- Increased funding is needed for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides a significant amount of nutritious food through food banks and helps maintain dignity of choice instead of limiting options.
- Reauthorization of TEFAP Rural Infrastructure Grants would help meet the need in rural communities where some of the highest rates of food insecurity exist.
- The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) should be reauthorized and streamlined to further improve the food security and health of seniors.
- Work with tribes is needed to increase food security in Native American communities, including allowing tribal governments to administer federal programs.
- Strong implementation and expanded access are needed for Summer EBT and the Summer Food Service Program rural non-congregate option, allowing access to critically important nutrition benefits for low-income children during the summer months when school is not in session.
- Access to the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program should be simplified and improved, allowing more schools to offer free meals to all students by expanding community eligibility and increasing opportunities to directly certify children for free meals.

Improve policies that support financial well-being

- The Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit should be permanently expanded. The 2021 expanded Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit together lifted more children above the poverty line than any other economic support program.
- Benefit cliffs that impede economic mobility and stability should be eliminated from programs where they exist.
- Investment in policies is critical to address high housing costs, including policies that will provide more affordable housing in communities, additional housing aid and oversight programs for landlords.

Recommended Citations

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Dewey, A., Harris, V., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2024). *Map the Meal Gap 2024: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2022*. Feeding America.

Notes

1. Whereas the USDA reports on food insecurity among Black, non-Hispanic households and individuals, estimates from *Map the Meal Gap* reflect food insecurity among Black individuals of all ethnicities.
2. The USDA's new report includes data that is an average of 2016-2021 at the household level, while data in this section taken from the USDA's annual food security report is at the individual level from 2022. As a result, the food insecurity rates/ratios mentioned on pages 5-6 are not directly comparable.
3. Notable safety net programs that started during the pandemic but ended just prior to or during 2022 include the expanded Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, as well as universal free school meals.

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