

MAP THE MEAL GAP 2023

**A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and
County Food Cost in the United States in 2021**

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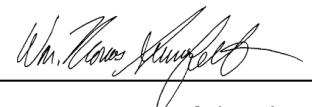
FOREWORD

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 2021. A strong public and private response to the COVID-19 crisis helped mitigate national food insecurity from rising significantly in 2020, and many of the response efforts continued at heightened levels into 2021. The result at the national level was a decline in food insecurity in 2021 for both the overall population and for children, with rates reaching the lowest levels on record. As this year's study shows, food insecurity similarly declined in many communities across the country. Yet as this year's study also shows, food insecurity did not improve everywhere, and significant disparities continue to exist both within and across geographies.

Feeding America is committed to addressing persistent racial inequities, and an important step towards doing that is understanding where they exist. For the first time in 2022, *Map the Meal Gap* also included local food insecurity data for several racial and ethnic identities. In 2023, we have continued to make those estimates available as additional input into understanding the ways racism and structural oppression impact food insecurity in the U.S. We are grateful to the team at We All Count for their continued guidance and insights as we have sought to improve how we embed equity into all facets of *Map the Meal Gap*, including our approach to generating estimates and communicating findings.

The strength of *Map the Meal Gap* has always been in its ability to initiate data-informed conversations, illuminate insights and drive actions across a broad spectrum of policymakers, hunger-relief partners, researchers and community organizations. This release of *Map the Meal Gap* comes at a critical time. While the results show that food insecurity improved in many places, most of the COVID-era programs that were responsible have now expired. That, coupled with historically high levels of inflation, may be a recipe for food insecurity to increase again.

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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INTRODUCTION



Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life.[i]

The economic downturn brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic could have led to a significant increase in overall food insecurity levels, but it did not. In 2020, national food insecurity increased only slightly (from 10.9% to 11.8%). In 2021, food insecurity levels not only declined, but among the overall population and among children they reached the lowest levels on record.[ii] During this time there was an unprecedented surge in federal, local, and private programs to address the crisis brought on by the pandemic which contributed to lower food insecurity levels.

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 2021. Throughout this time, food insecurity levels for Black and Latino individuals are notably higher than the national average. There was a deepening racial divide in 2020, as rates increased among both Black and Latino individuals while declining among white individuals. In 2021, food insecurity declined for all three groups - to 19.7% among Black individuals, 16.6% among Latino individuals, and 6.7% among white individuals. The largest decline in individual food insecurity occurred among Black individuals, and Black households were the only racial or ethnic group that saw a significant change in household food insecurity in 2021.[v]

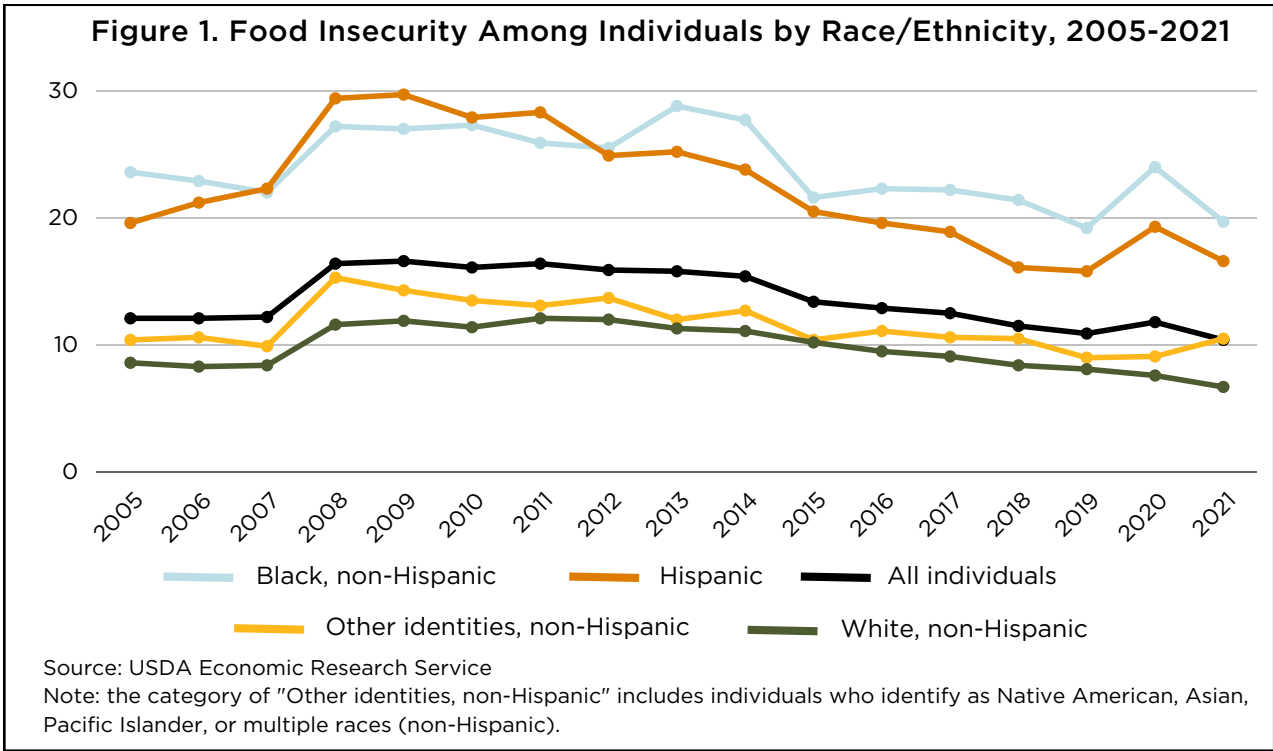


Figure 1 collapses results for individuals who identify as Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiple races into the “other identities” category. While the food insecurity prevalence for this combined category has trended below the average for all individuals in previous years, in 2021 it increased noticeably. Each group faces distinct and disparate experiences that are masked when combined like this, so we explore food insecurity for each group separately later in this report.

While national data can help tell a broad story about food insecurity in the United States, experiences differ by location and community. For the thirteenth 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 at the local level. For the second year, the study also includes local food insecurity estimates for several racial and ethnic groups. By examining variations in local need as of 2021, including how need varies by age and race/ethnicity, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people facing hunger today.

The following section highlights ten key findings from this year’s study. Next, we provide information about food insecurity among the overall population, children, seniors and older adults, followed by a section about food insecurity and race and ethnicity. The report concludes with a call to action and implications related to research and policy.

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 2% in Griggs County, North Dakota to 26% in places like Kusilvak Census Area, Alaska. 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. In response to these challenges, multiple interventions have been shown to reduce food insecurity. For example, national food insecurity would likely have been much higher in 2020 and 2021 if not for the unprecedented collective response by the charitable and public sectors to the public health and economic crises caused by COVID-19. Of particular note for 2021 was the 20% increase in the Thrifty Food Plan which led to large increases in benefits for all SNAP recipients.

2 Food insecurity among Black or Latino individuals is higher than white individuals in more than 9 out of every 10 counties.

Disparities by race and ethnicity existed before and continue to be stark during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In nearly 99% of counties with comparable data (1,431 out of 1,452), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities range in magnitude and are as high as 48 percentage points in Cumberland County, Tennessee (59% versus 11%, respectively). In nearly 96% of counties with comparable data (1,695 out of 1,771), food insecurity among Latino individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities also range in magnitude and are as high as 26 percentage points in Jackson County, Arkansas (42% versus 16%, respectively). In nearly 82% of counties with comparable data (906 out of 1,109), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among Latino individuals; these disparities range in magnitude as well and are as high as 37 percentage points in Cumberland County, Tennessee (59% versus 22%, respectively).

3 County food insecurity varies by as much as 58 percentage points for some racial/ethnic groups

At the local level, estimated food insecurity rates among Black individuals range from less than 1% in Wright County, Minnesota, to 59% in Cumberland County, Tennessee. Food insecurity rates among Latino individuals range from approximately 3% in Calvert County, Maryland, to 42% in Jackson County, Arkansas. Food insecurity rates among white, non-Hispanic individuals range from less than 1% in the District of Columbia to 28% in Wolfe County, Kentucky.

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

While approximately 13% (1 in 8) of children across the U.S. may experience food insecurity, estimated rates reach as high as 43% (1 in 2) in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. Food insecurity is also more prevalent among children than it is among the total population in every state and in more than 8 out of 10 counties (2,593 out of 3,143). 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 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. 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 \$39,000 to \$60,000 for a family of four as of January 2023). Moreover, many households that are eligible under the gross income test may not be eligible under the net income test and, in states not waiving the asset test, many households are ineligible even if they meet the gross and net income tests. County estimates indicate that 12.5 million or 37% (1 in 3) of individuals experiencing food insecurity may not be eligible for SNAP, after accounting for state-specific gross income limits. In some counties, everyone who is estimated to be food insecure likely qualifies for SNAP; however, the share of people experiencing food insecurity who are likely ineligible for the program is estimated to be as high as 96% in Loving County, Texas. 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 more than \$20 more per week to meet their food needs

A person who is food insecure reports needing, on average, an additional \$20.91 per week or \$53 per month to buy just enough food to meet their needs. This represents an increase of nearly 16% from 2020 after adjusting for inflation (\$17.25 in 2020 is equivalent to \$18.06 in 2021 dollars) and the first time the weekly shortfall has surpassed \$20. The total annual food budget shortfall across all individuals estimated to be food insecure stands at \$21.5 billion, up from \$20.0 billion in 2020 (\$21.0 billion in 2021 dollars). The national annual shortfall is still well below its peak of more than \$24 billion in 2013 and 2014 (\$28 billion in 2021 dollars) despite the recent increase in the weekly per capita amount due to the steady decline in the number of individuals experiencing food insecurity (from 49.1 million in 2013 to 33.8 million in 2021).

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

The South contains 45% of all U.S. counties but was home to an estimated 83% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity (267 of the 321 counties in the top 10% of all 3,143 counties). One in 5 (19%) counties in the South had high food insecurity (with rates of 16.1% or greater), compared to 1 in 25 (4%) in the West and 1 in 30 (3%) in the Midwest. Bronx County, New York is the sole county in Northeast (1 in 217 or 0.5%) that appears 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 (11.4% as compared to 10.3% in the West, 10.1% in the Midwest, and 8.6% 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 89% of counties with food-insecurity rates in the top 10% (285 out of 321). In other words, counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are disproportionately rural. This also reflects the sharp disparity in food insecurity rates across the U.S. While overall rates of food insecurity are similar across metro (urban) and non-metro (rural) areas there are pockets of very high rates in rural areas.

9 The national average cost per meal was \$3.59

Individuals who are food secure reported spending an average of \$3.59 per meal, up from \$3.25 in 2020 (\$3.40 in 2021 dollars) and the highest reported amount since 2005 (\$3.41 in 2021 dollars). At \$3.59 per meal, a person who is food secure spends an average of \$327.59 on food per month (\$353.48 in February 2023 dollars). For context, this reported amount is 1.6 times as much as the average individual cost of the Thrifty Food Plan (\$203.11 as of December 2021), which represents a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet and what the USDA uses to calculate the maximum SNAP benefit allotments. Prior to the update of the TFP in 2021, people who were food secure reported spending nearly 1.9 times as much as the TFP (\$296.56 versus \$158.57 as of December 2020).

10 County meal costs range from \$2.73 to \$7.89.

County meal costs range from 76% of the national average (\$3.59) in Dimmit County and Maverick County (\$2.73) along the southwest border of Texas to close to twice the national average in places like New York County, New York (\$5.93), after accounting for local sales taxes and using county food price data from NielsenIQ. 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. For example, urban Bexar County in Texas where San Antonio is located has a relatively low estimated meal cost of \$3.21 while rural Leelanau County in northwest Michigan is home to the highest meal cost in the country (\$7.89). 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.



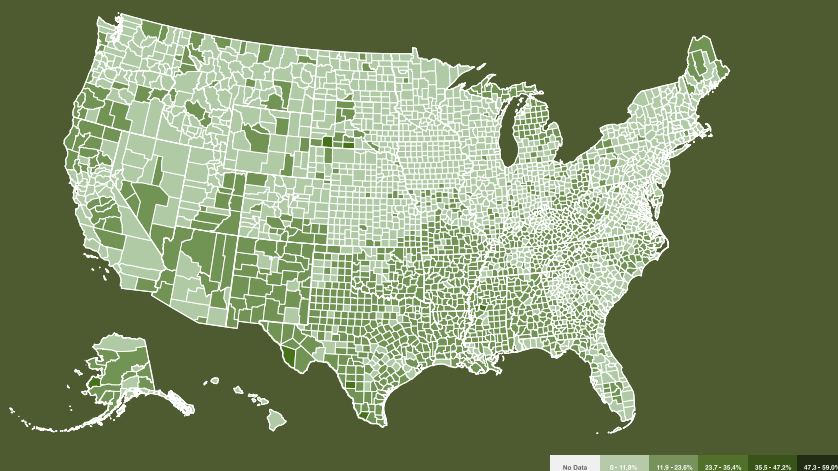
FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

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 2021 for the overall population.

Table 1. Counties with the highest overall food insecurity in 2021					
Highest food insecurity rates			Highest number of food insecure persons		
Rank	County	Food Insecurity rate	Rank	County	Number of FI persons
1	Oglala Lakota County, SD	26.3%	1	Los Angeles County, CA	1,132,600
2	Kusilvak Census Area County, AK	25.9%	2	Harris County, TX	647,750
3	Todd County, SD	25.5%	3	Cook County, IL	483,790
4	Dimmit County, TX	25.4%	4	Maricopa County, AZ	400,830
5	Holmes County, MS	24.8%	5	Kings County, NY	377,100
6	Presidio County, TX	24.5%	6	Dallas County, TX	340,260
7	Wolfe County, KY	24.0%	7	San Diego County, CA	297,010
8	Humphreys County, MS	24.0%	8	Miami-Dade County, FL	278,950
9	Starr County, TX	23.7%	9	Bexar County, TX	278,860
10	Brooks County, TX	23.3%	10	Bronx County, NY	271,700

Figure 2. Map of county-level food insecurity among the overall population in 2021



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

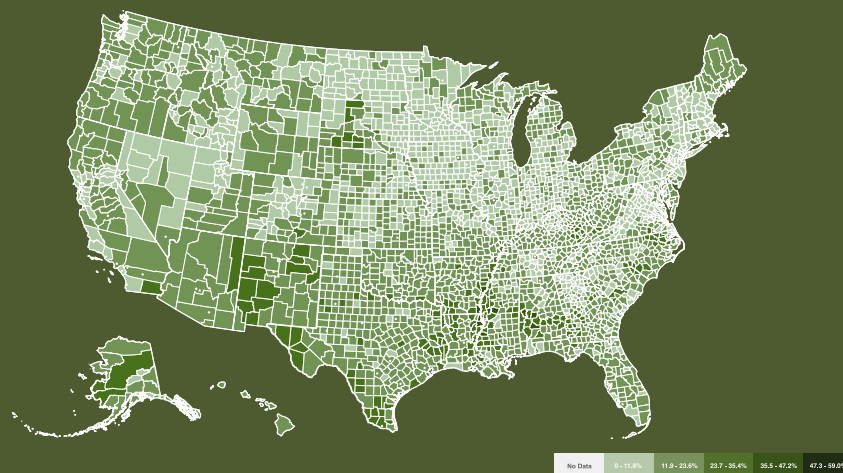
FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

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 2021.

Table 2. Counties with the highest child food insecurity in 2021					
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 County, LA	42.8%	1	Los Angeles County, CA	336,120
2	Humphreys County, MS	41.0%	2	Harris County, TX	248,470
3	Holmes County, MS	40.3%	3	Cook County, IL	149,350
4	Perry County, AL	39.8%	4	Dallas County, TX	134,560
5	Phillips County, AR	39.1%	5	Kings County, NY	134,150
6	Greene County, AL	37.8%	6	Maricopa County, AZ	129,680
7	Jefferson County, MS	37.8%	7	Bronx County, NY	111,740
8	Chicot County, AR	36.4%	8	Wayne County, MI	94,420
9	Wilcox County, AL	36.1%	9	Bexar County, TX	93,760
10	Madison Parish County, LA	36.1%	10	Tarrant County, TX	93,320

Figure 3. Map of county-level food insecurity among the child population in 2021



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

SENIORS & OLDER ADULTS



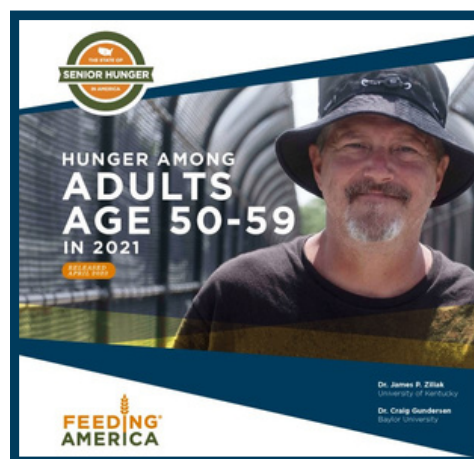
The methodology of *Map the Meal Gap* allows for the estimation of food insecurity among the overall population and among children, but not for other age cohorts. To better understand the extent of food insecurity among seniors and older adults, Feeding America has partnered with Drs. James Ziliak and Craig Gundersen to produce two reports: *The State of Senior Hunger in 2021*, and *Hunger Among Adults Age 50-59 in 2021*.

These reports provide the following estimates for seniors 60 and older and for older adults age 50-59:

- The rate and number of individuals experiencing food insecurity at the national level;
- Food insecurity according to socioeconomic categories at the national level;
- Food insecurity rates for 50 states and Washington D.C. and for large metropolitan areas.

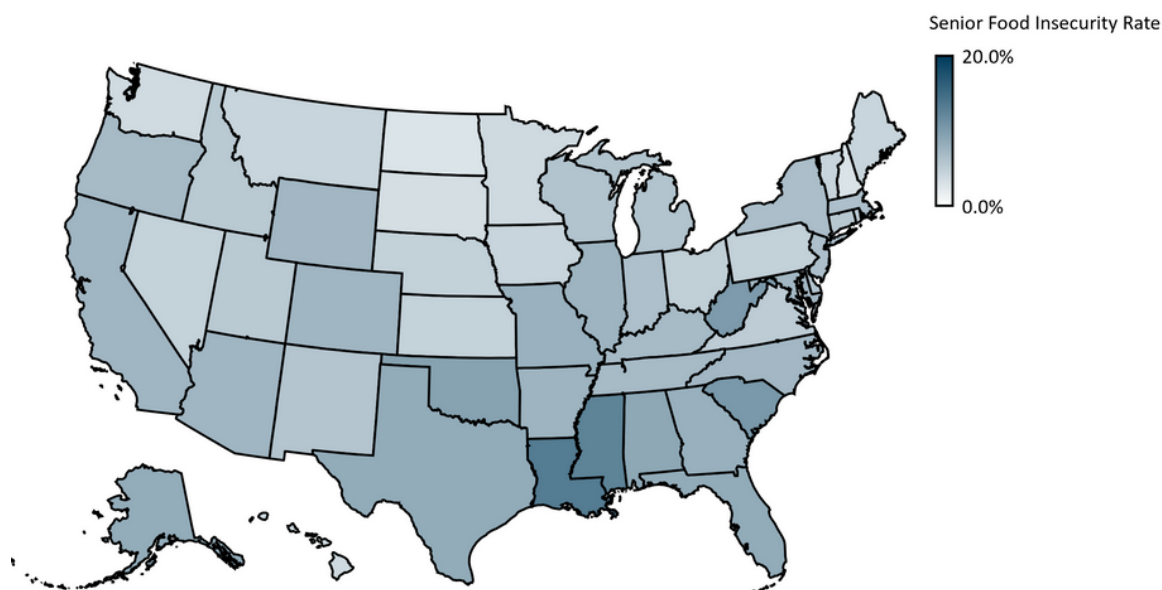
The full reports and key findings can be found at the URL below:

<https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research>.



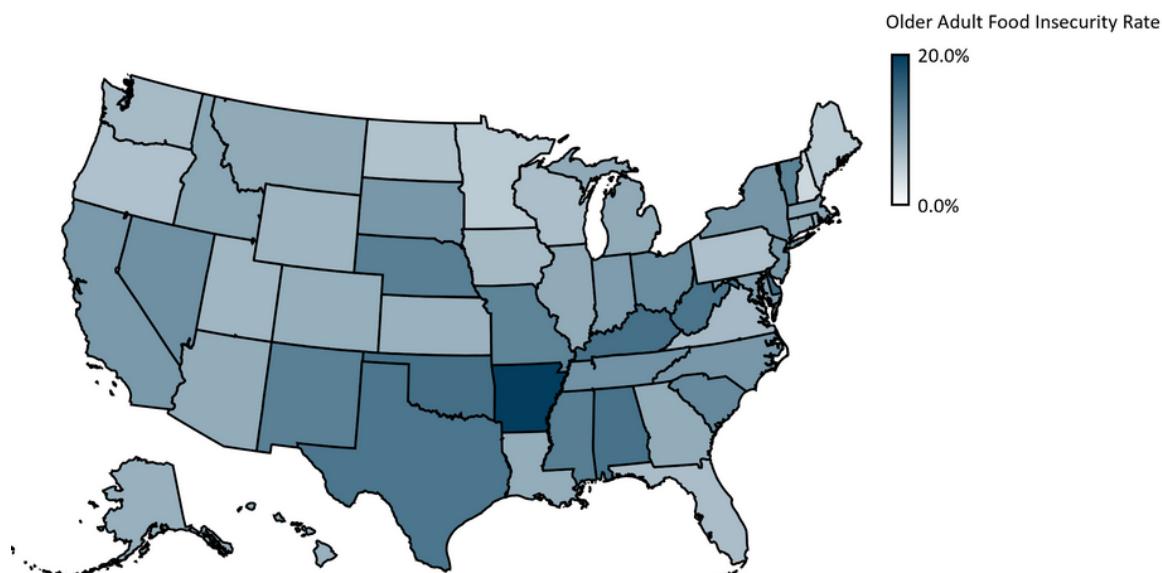
In 2021, 7.1% of the population age 60 and older, or 5.5 million seniors, were food insecure. The figure below shows how food insecurity among seniors varies by state.

Figure 4. Map of State-level Food Insecurity Among Seniors in 2021



In 2021, 9.4% of the population age 50 to 59, or 3.8 million older adults, were food insecure. The figure below shows how food insecurity among older adults varies by state.

Figure 5. Map of State-level Food Insecurity Among Adults Age 50-59 in 2021



State-level data from *The State of Senior Hunger* report series are now available on the *Map the Meal Gap* interactive map at map.feedingamerica.org.

FOOD INSECURITY BY

RACE AND 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 second time in 2023, *Map the Meal Gap* includes local food insecurity data for Black individuals, Latino individuals, and white, non-Hispanic 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

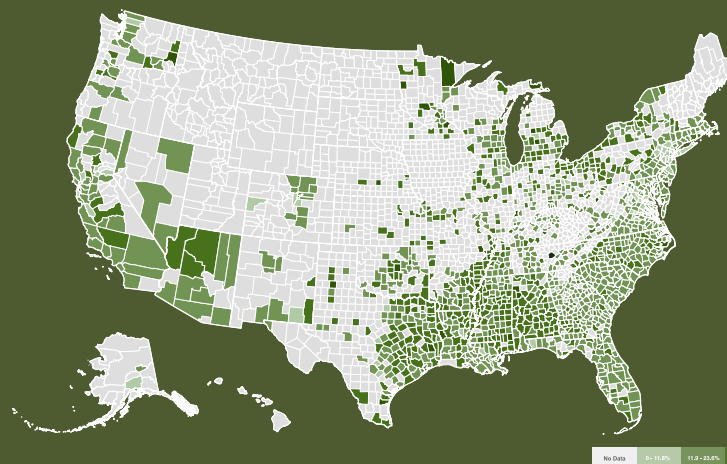
BLACK COMMUNITIES



In 2021, food insecurity among Black individuals was 19.7%, down from 24.0% in 2020, although Black populations have had substantially higher food insecurity rates than average since the USDA began measuring food insecurity.[vi] *Map the Meal Gap* reveals that in nearly 99% of counties with comparable data (n=1,452), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities range in magnitude and are as high as 48 percentage points in Cumberland County, TN (59% versus 11%, respectively). For those counties with data available, eight (or less than 1% of counties with available data) have a food insecurity rate for Black individuals that is under 5%.

In recent 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 was less than 15 percent that of white families (\$24,100 vs. \$188,200) in 2019.[vii] This is just one example of the stark and persistent racial disparities that result from embedded racism in historical, political, cultural and socio-economic systems and institutions.

Figure 6. Map of county-level food insecurity among Black individuals in 2021



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

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG LATINO COMMUNITIES

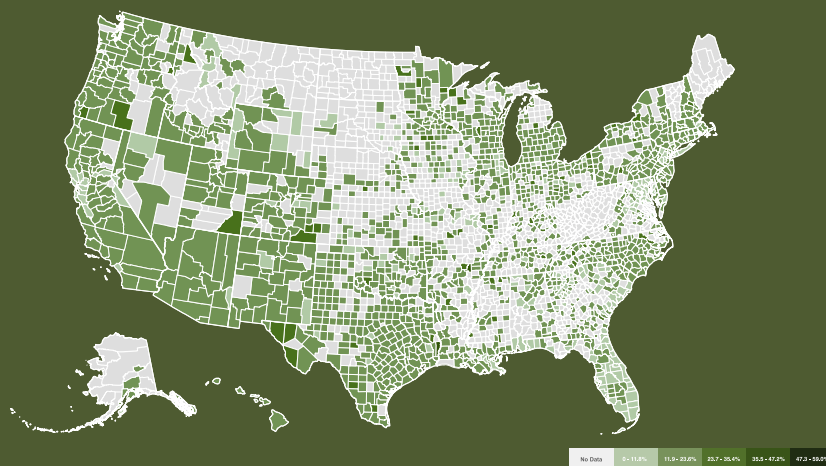


In 2021, food insecurity among Latino individuals was 16.6%, compared to 10.4% for the full population and 6.7% for white, non-Hispanic individuals.[viii] *Map the Meal Gap* reveals that in nearly 96% of counties with comparable data (n=1,771), these disparities remain and are as high as 26 percentage points in Jackson County, AR (42% among Latino individuals versus 16% among white individuals). While disparities persist, food insecurity for Latino individuals varies by geography, ranging from approximately 3% in Calvert County, MD to 42% in Jackson County, AR.

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.[ix] 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.[x]

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 7. Map of county-level food insecurity among Latino individuals in 2021



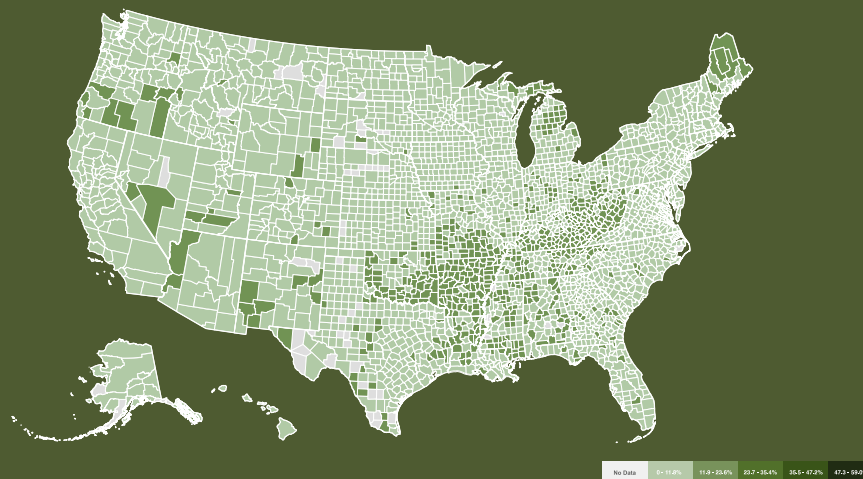
To access the interactive map and additional information about data availability and suppression, visit map.feedingamerica.org.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG WHITE COMMUNITIES



In 2021, food insecurity among white, non-Hispanic individuals was 6.7%, a rate significantly lower in comparison to most other racial and ethnic groups.[xi] 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 13 million white individuals experienced food insecurity in 2021, which represents the highest number of individuals within a racial or ethnic group (since 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 28% in Wolfe County, KY, with higher rates more concentrated among rural counties and in the South.

Figure 8. Map of county-level food insecurity among white individuals in 2021



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

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

ASIAN AMERICAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER 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 (2017-2021), approximately 6% of Asian Americans (1 in 17) experienced food insecurity.[xii] Conversely, Pacific Islander individuals have been more likely to experience food insecurity (1 in 6, or approximately 17%).[xiii]

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).[xiv] 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.[xv, xvi]

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

Asian Group	Food Insecurity Rate
Asian Indian	4%
Chinese	3%
Filipino	11%
Japanese	3%
Korean	5%
Vietnamese	7%
Reporting other Asian identity	12%

Note: Individuals who identify as Asian (only) are asked to future self-identify from among the options show in this table.

Source: Calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen for Feeding America, using a five-year average (2017-2021) 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 3% among recent immigrants from Israel to more than 20% among recent immigrants from Afghanistan.

Table 4. Food insecurity among recent immigrants from select Asian or Pacific Island countries (2017-2021)

Country	Food Insecurity Rate	Country	Food Insecurity Rate	Country	Food Insecurity Rate
Afghanistan	22%	Pakistan	9%	Syria	4%
Nepal	20%	Malaysia	8%	Japan	4%
Bangladesh	18%	Philippines	8%	Taiwan	3%
Myanmar	18%	Saudi Arabia	8%	China	3%
Iraq	18%	Vietnam	8%	Lebanon	3%
Cambodia	14%	Turkey	8%	India	3%
Thailand	12%	Iran	7%	Israel	3%
Laos	11%	Guam	7%	Other	9%
Indonesia	10%	Korea	5%		

Source: Calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen for Feeding America, using a five-year average (2017-2021) from the Current Population Survey. Only countries with at least 75 persons (unweighted data) who were born in the country were included. The category labeled "Other" includes instances where the Asian country is not specified.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES



According to Census data, approximately 20% of Native American individuals (1 in 5) were food insecure (based on five-year average, 2017-2021).[xvii] 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.[xviii, xix] 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.[xx, xxi, xxii]

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.[xxiii] 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.[xxiv] Additionally, only about 26% of Native American individuals live within a mile of a grocery store (compared to 59% of the U.S. population).[xxv]

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. Beginning in 2022, *Map the Meal Gap* includes data about the prevalence of food insecurity for select racial and ethnic identities, revealing 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.[xxvi] 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 to adequately and equitably get 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

Dissagregate 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.[xxvii, xxviii] 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.

Examine the Impact 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 affect 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, as well as this dashboard that examines disparities by race and ethnicity in the drivers of food insecurity. 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. In 2023, Congress is working to reauthorize the Farm Bill which includes many critical anti-hunger programs. Addressing food insecurity requires a robust safety net of federal nutrition programs and other policy solutions so it is vital that Congress strengthen these programs in the 2023 Farm Bill. Some of these policy solutions are outlined below.

Strengthen & 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 2022, more than one in six people received food from a charitable food distribution.[xxix] 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. Additionally, Congress must reauthorize and streamline reporting for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides nutrition food boxes to seniors who are low-income and age 60 years and older.

Strengthen and Modernize the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is the cornerstone of the nation's federal nutrition programs, providing more than 41 million people in the U.S. with monthly food benefits via a grocery debit card. [xxx] 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:** SNAP benefits should be set at an adequate level (i.e., based on the Low-Cost Food Plan) so families can purchase healthy foods. Strengthening SNAP benefits would also help seniors, people with disabilities, people working low-wage jobs, and others who are most likely to qualify for the minimum benefit. Finally, Congress should strengthen SNAP's well-designed structure that allows a gradual phase-out from benefits to income, and reduce the "benefits cliff."

- **Simplify and Streamline Eligibility and 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 in implementation 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.
- **Strengthen Efforts to Support Work:** For many seeking employment, SNAP can be one of the few resources available for receiving food support during a job search. The harsh policy that ceases food assistance after only three months is complex and error-prone. Additionally, it has resulted in increased food insecurity while not proving to positively impact employment. Without expanding current work requirements, Congress can help SNAP participants find work by removing the time limit on benefits to allow participants to find work, improving state employment and training programs, and ensuring recipients are offered training opportunities that align with best practices.
- **Ensure Parity in Food Assistance for U.S. Territories and Sovereignty for Native Communities:** U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are 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.



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.[xxxix]

As of the 2022 release of the study, we now include estimates of 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 2021 estimates from *Map the Meal Gap* include the Current Population Survey (CPS), American Community Survey (ACS) and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). State data are from the CPS and BLS (2010-2021). County data for all variables except unemployment reflect five-year averages from the ACS (2017-2021); unemployment data reflect one-year averages from the BLS (2021). District data for all variables reflect one-year ACS averages (2021).[xxxix]

In addition to measuring the prevalence of food insecurity at the local level, the study also estimates local meal costs and food budget shortfalls. These measures, which approximate how much money food secure individuals spend on food, as well as how much more money food insecure individuals would need to spend to be food secure, are based on national survey data from the Census Bureau and localized using food price data from NielsenIQ and local sales taxes imposed on groceries for every county and state. More information on methodology is available online in our technical brief.

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