

Child Food Insecurity



Food insecurity has the potential to be harmful to individuals of any age, but it can be especially devastating to children. The USDA estimates that more than 11 million children in the United States lived in food-insecure households 2018.¹ That means that 1 in 7 children (15.2%) may not have consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

For the tenth 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. This year *Map the Meal Gap* uses an updated methodology and is released with a companion study on the potential impact of COVID-19 on child food insecurity at the local level utilizing the underlying *Map the Meal Gap* model. Included here are findings related to food insecurity among children, one of four related topics that make up the *Map the Meal Gap 2020* report briefs.

11.2 million

-or-

1/7

children are at risk of hunger.

50

states and D.C. are home to food-insecure children.

86%

of counties with high child food insecurity are rural.

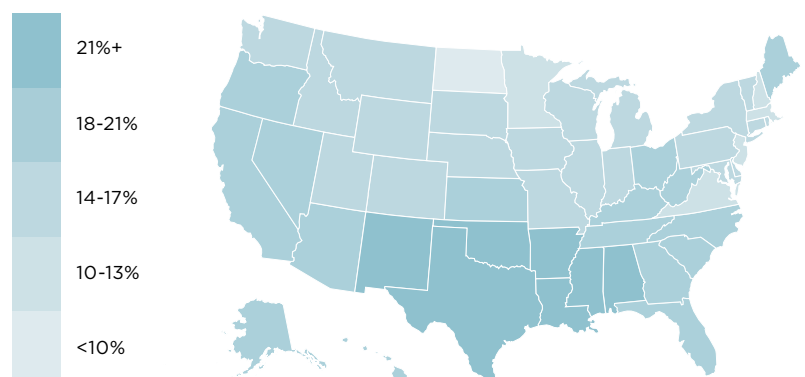
660,000

children may be food insecure in Los Angeles and New York City.

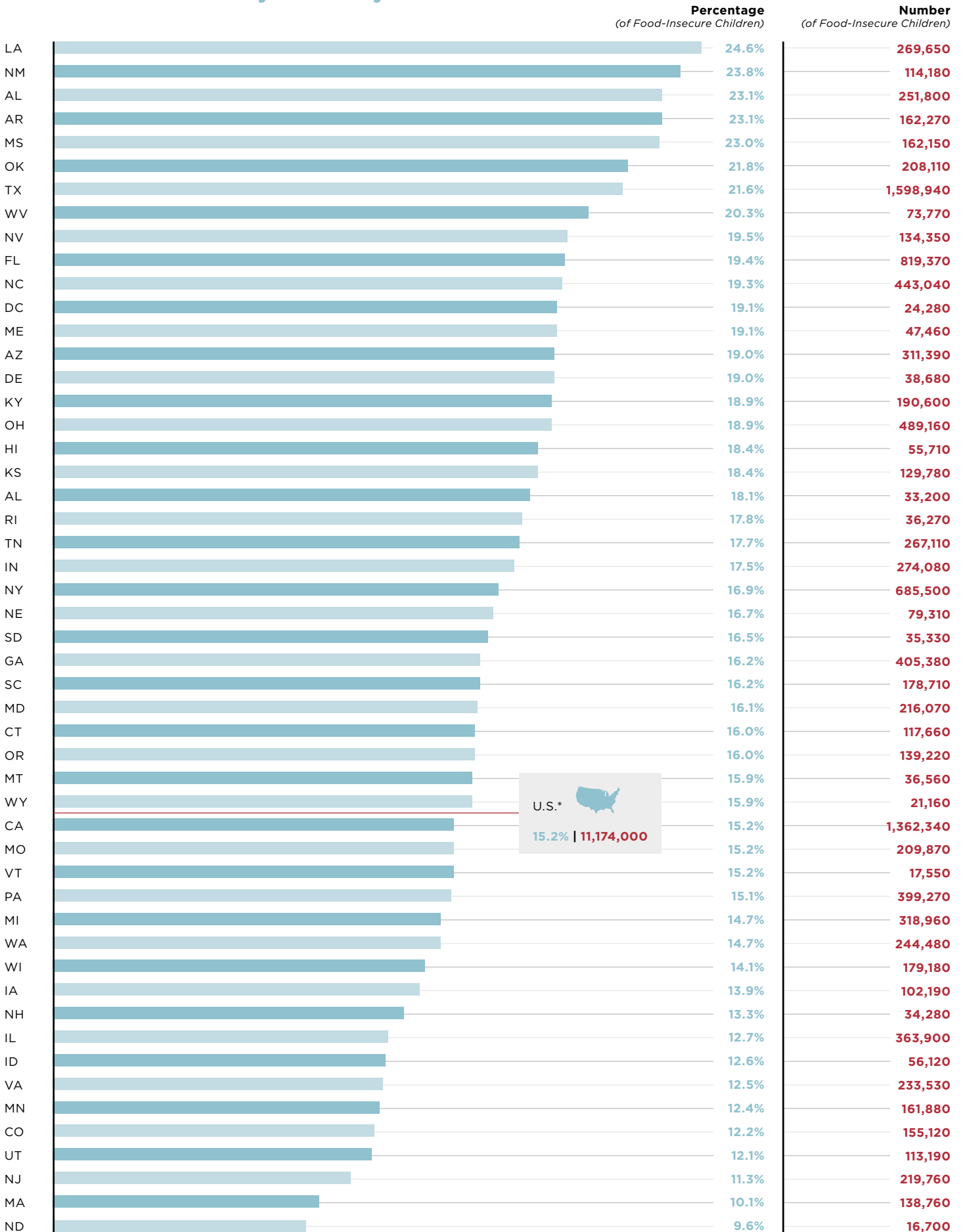
Key Findings

Child Food Insecurity Among States and Congressional Districts

In all 50 states and Washington, D.C., the estimated rate of child food insecurity is higher than the rate of overall food insecurity. Child food insecurity ranges from 10% in North Dakota to 25% in Louisiana. Eighty percent of the counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are in the South, and 55% of Southern counties have child food insecurity rates greater than 21%. Among congressional districts, rates of child food insecurity span from 5% (more than 12,000 children) in affluent districts like Virginia's 10th, bordering Washington, D.C., to a high of 31% (more than 45,000 children) in Alabama's 7th, which encompasses parts of Birmingham, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa.



Child Food Insecurity Rates by State



* USDA, 2019

Child Food Insecurity Among Counties

Just as every state is home to food-insecure children, no county is free of child food insecurity. Rates range from 2% in Falls Church City, Virginia to 44% in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. The variation in rates of child food insecurity shows that need is more pervasive in specific communities. Counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity have notably higher unemployment and poverty rates and lower median incomes.



High Child Food Insecurity counties are the counties with the top 10% of child food insecurity rates.



29%

of children are food insecure



Higher poverty



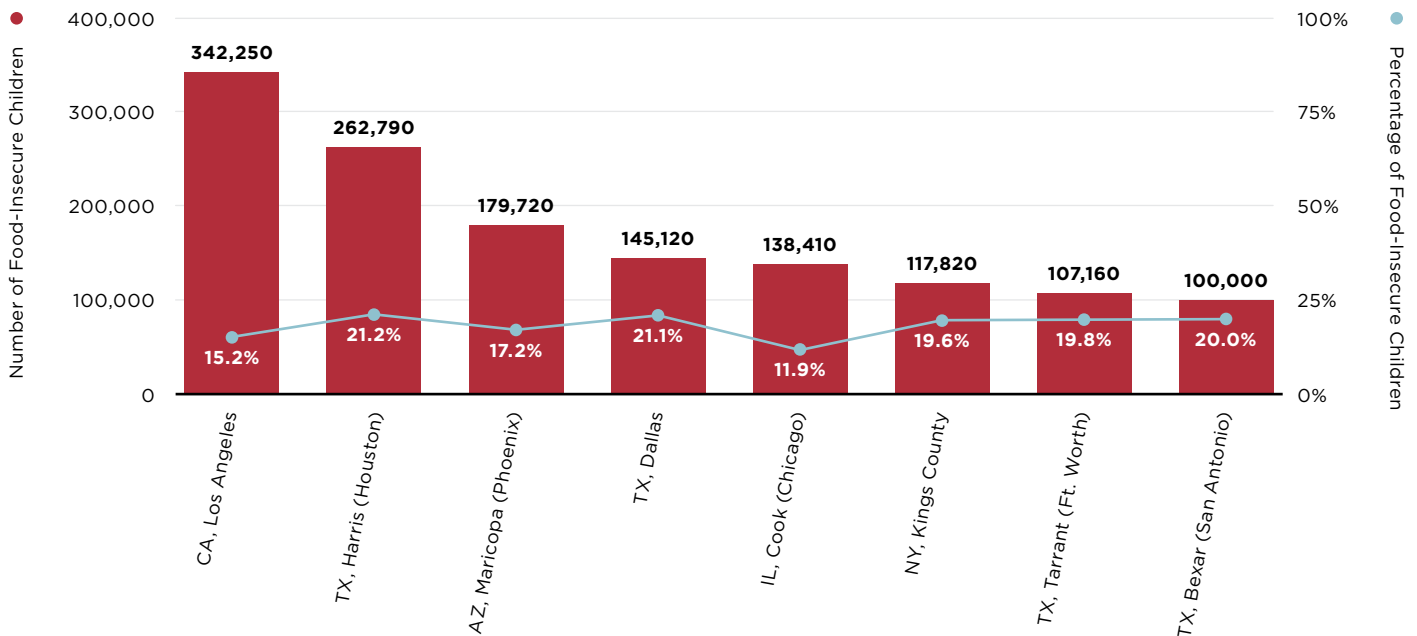
Higher unemployment



Lower median income

Although the child food insecurity rate is one important indicator of need, even counties with more modest rates may still be home to large numbers of children whose families are food insecure. For example, the counties encompassing Los Angeles and New York City have rates of child food insecurity (15% and 18%, respectively) close to the national county average (16%). However, there is high need in both areas: more than 342,000 food-insecure children live in Los Angeles County and more than 317,000 food-insecure children live in the counties encompassing the five boroughs of New York City. **Both urban and rural counties face unique challenges with food insecurity.**

Counties with more than 100,000 Food-Insecure Children



Implications of Child Food Insecurity

The consequences and costs of food insecurity for all ages make addressing the issue an economic and social imperative. In particular, inadequate nutrition can stunt children's development, affecting their learning and social interaction.²

Health, Behavior and Education

There is a broad base of literature illustrating links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes at every age. For example, food-insecure women are more likely to experience birth complications than food-secure women³ and have iron deficiencies.⁴ One indicator of child and maternal health is low birthweight among infants,⁵ which is more common among counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity than across all counties (10% versus 8%). Furthermore, children struggling with food insecurity may be at greater risk for stunted development,⁶ anemia and asthma,^{7,8} oral health problems,⁹ hospitalization,¹⁰ mental disorders,¹¹ and lower nutrient intakes.^{12,13} Overall, food insecurity is linked with poorer physical quality of life, which may prevent children from fully engaging in daily activities.¹⁴ At school, food-insecure children are at increased risk of falling behind their food-secure peers both academically and socially; food insecurity is linked to lower grades¹⁵ and non-cognitive skills,¹⁶ and they may be more likely to exhibit behavioral problems,^{17,18} including anxiety,¹⁹ psychological distress²⁰ and substance use²¹ and to experience bullying.²²

Policy and Programs

While charitable assistance plays a critical role in helping families meet their food needs, federal nutrition programs are the first line of defense against hunger.

Federal Nutrition Programs



17 million children
SNAP²³



5.2 million infants and children
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Federal School Nutrition Programs²⁴



22 million children
National School Lunch Program



12.5 million children
School Breakfast Program



3.7 million children
Summer Food Service Program
+ Seamless Summer Option

Free and reduced-price lunch

Some families in need of public support, however, face challenges maintaining consistent enrollment while others may not even qualify for federal assistance. **One in four food-insecure children lives in a home that is likely ineligible for these important programs, underscoring the critical role of both the public and private sector in addressing child food insecurity.**²⁵ Together, these programs weave a comprehensive nutritional safety net that reaches children where they live, learn and play. Through collaborative efforts between the Feeding America network of food banks and partner agencies, policymakers, business leaders, community activists, and concerned citizens, every child in America could receive the nutrition they need.

Map the Meal Gap Methodology

To accurately estimate the number of people experiencing food insecurity in every U.S. county and congressional district, *Map the Meal Gap* uses publicly available state and local data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics on factors that research has shown to contribute to food insecurity. These factors include unemployment and poverty as well as other socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Beginning in 2020, the estimates also account for disability status, one of the key risk factors for food insecurity. 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 Nielsen and national survey data from the Census Bureau. More information on methodology is available online in our [technical brief](#).

Map the Meal Gap 2020 also features report [briefs](#) on other topics, including an executive summary, an overview of food price variations, and an analysis of health, disability and food insecurity. Additionally, the [interactive map](#) allows for the exploration of food insecurity across geographies throughout the U.S.

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