



MICRO-REPORT

Child Hunger In Rural America



Report On Child Food Insecurity in Rural Communities from No Kid Hungry & Feeding America

This report is about an overlooked crisis: children living with the threat of hunger in rural America. This is a joint project from Feeding America and No Kid Hungry, our nation's largest anti-hunger organizations and campaigns.

In it, you will learn more about the specific challenges facing low-income families in rural America when it comes to food: geographic isolation, lack of opportunities, limited resources, and programmatic barriers. You'll also learn more about the solutions we recommend. This is a problem we can—and must—solve.



Childhood hunger out here is really staggering. There's no avoiding it."

LAURA PHILLIPS
Mountaineer Food Bank, Gassaway, W.Va.
Interview conducted in summer 2019

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Children Facing the Threat of Hunger

There are families struggling to get by in every American community. Nationally, 1 in 7 children face food insecurity, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

But it's worse in rural America, according to information collected and published annually by the USDA:

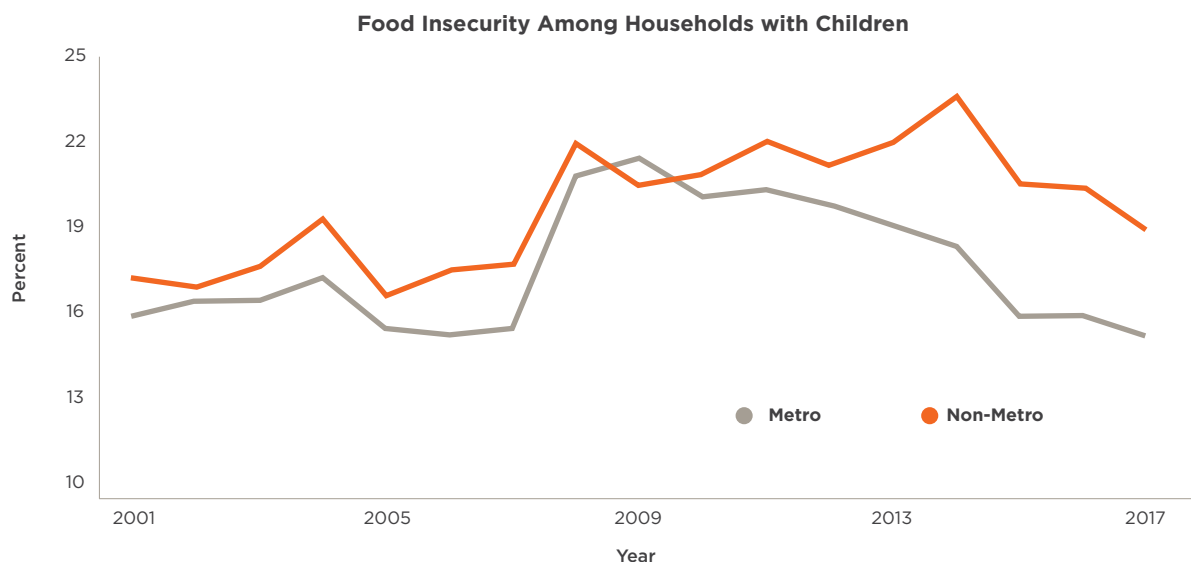
- Poverty rates are higher in rural communities, and 84% of U.S. counties with the highest percentage of food insecure children are rural.
- The job market in suburbs and cities has long since recovered from the Great Recession, but job growth remains limited in rural counties and small towns.
- More rural counties also experience “persistent poverty” than urban communities—high rates of poverty over a long period. Nearly 90% of counties experiencing long-term poverty have entirely rural populations.

Our research took place against this background. Despite what these numbers tell us about food insecurity in rural America, few researchers have gone into these communities to hear firsthand from the families who live there.

What makes it harder for kids to get enough to eat in rural communities? Our research showed economic instability and lack of job opportunities is a major factor, along with the relatively few options where families can conveniently shop for food and challenges with transportation—including difficulty getting kids from isolated homes to school or community programs that can provide food.

“When you talk about urban poverty, a lot of times it’s very pocketed, so it’s easier to get services, and there’s community services that already come in,” said Bill Caten, an elementary school principal in rural Virginia. “In rural places, it’s so spread out that kids don’t have access. They can’t walk around the corner to the food kitchen. Some of our kids are left to fend for themselves.”

But there are also reasons to be hopeful. Rural communities have important strengths: strong social ties between people, a deep connection to place and locally-owned businesses. Building on these strengths, we can help address the challenges these children face.



An analysis of Current Population Survey data by Dr. James Ziliak of the University of Kentucky

Our Study

To hear directly from families in rural areas, No Kid Hungry (a campaign of Share Our Strength) and Feeding America commissioned a qualitative study to understand what makes it difficult for families in rural areas to provide food for their children. A team of researchers from six universities (led by Dr. Lindsey Haynes-Maslow of North Carolina State University), conducted 153 in-depth interviews with a diverse range of parents and caregivers living in rural counties in Arkansas, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and West Virginia. The majority had incomes below the federal poverty line (\$25,100 per year for a family of four), and faced low or very low food security.

A Note on Quotes

We have included a number of quotes to let readers hear directly from the Americans whose perspectives are the heart of this report. Quotes from families are taken directly from our research, though names and identifying details have been changed to protect their anonymity. Quotes from service providers are not from the research study, but from interviews conducted at No Kid Hungry's 2019 Rural Child Hunger Summit in Louisville, Kentucky.

Life in Rural America: Strong Family Ties But Limited Jobs

The study found that families in rural areas largely feel positive about their communities, citing the close-knit nature of life in the country or in small towns—there are family and friends to rely on in times of need. And they feel the quiet and safety of their communities make them good places to raise children.

“[This] is a really small community,” said Dolores, a mom from rural Arkansas who relies on SNAP benefits. “Everybody knows everybody, so there are no strangers. It’s just like everybody is family.”

Yet even though many people feel a strong connection to where they’re from, they wouldn’t encourage others to move there. A constant refrain is the lack of adequately paying jobs—or any jobs at all.

“Rural areas are losing population and losing jobs and losing the ability to find work,” said Laura Phillips, who manages child hunger programs for Mountaineer Food Bank in Gassaway, West Virginia. “That causes a variety of problems that lead to child hunger. People want to do well for their families, but [job opportunities] are just not available in their local communities.”



For men in rural areas without advanced education or skilled job training, employment has plummeted, according to research by Dr. James Ziliak, of the University of Kentucky. Today, fully half of the men who lack high school degrees are out of the labor force in rural America. But in 1967, just a generation ago, 90% of these men had jobs.

“If you want a good-paying job, this is not a place to come and get it,” said Helen, who lives with her family in a Native American community in Montana.

Other studies point to the changing nature of the U.S. economy as a chief culprit: industries like farming, logging, mining, manufacturing and textiles were the main sources of rural jobs for generations. But these jobs are increasingly automated or outsourced to other countries, leaving people in small towns and rural counties with far fewer ways to earn a living.

“A lot of people in this area, if they do work pipeline, certain times of the year they’re without employment, so they have to make their money stretch,” said Debbie, a mother from West Virginia whose children rely on free school meals. “And when you have a family to feed, that can be very difficult at times, especially in a rural area because of all the other expenses of living in that area.”

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DEBBIE
Mother | West Virginia

This study’s interviews underscore the link between food insecurity, poverty, and the local economy. When people struggle to feed their children, they’re often facing unemployment, underemployment and a neverending cycle of bills that overwhelm the household budget. Many have trouble finding employment, or have to work low-wage or seasonal jobs. As such, many participants had to prioritize other expenses over food, like housing, transportation, and medical costs. Families aren’t able to get a “leg up” and ultimately find themselves in a cycle of food insecurity.

“We’ve been renting, and you got your power bill and then you got the car payment, and with the car payment you got the insurance, and for the house, you got Wi-Fi, and bills and expenses from the kids, school, traveling, clothes, food, because we buy their lunches and stuff,” said Daniel, who lives with his family in rural Montana, and depends on SNAP benefits and Medicaid. “So we would end up stressing on a bill or two or whatever, or maybe not buying all the food we wanted for the month.”

Those interviewed in the study mentioned other additional challenges, including being a single parent (which affects income and child care), lack of child support payments, substance abuse and domestic violence. The difficulty of finding affordable child care was also a recurring theme for parents who were working or going back to school for an advanced degree.





What's Different? Access & Isolation in Rural America

In many ways, the challenges experienced by low-income families in rural areas seem similar to those in other places—a lack of resources and opportunities. But challenges specific to rural communities came up as a barrier to food access: distance, transportation, and availability.

“My county is 37 miles across, and we have schools spread out strategically throughout the whole county,” said Christy Lawson, food service supervisor for a rural district in southwest Virginia. “And the roads are gravel or dirt, a lot of them. You’ll go two or three miles before you have another house to stop at. That’s something you do not see in the metropolitan areas. Out here, our buses sometimes only have 20 children, but they’re on the road an hour and a half to pick up those 20 children. That’s huge.”

Families in isolated areas carry out bulk shopping trips, driving to distant supermarkets each month to fill up on staple food items. These trips cost time and money, but local options—if they exist—tend to be more expensive and have limited options. These costs are barriers to obtaining enough healthy food, especially among those with limited transportation options.

“Our area, because of how it’s spread out, we have a lot of food deserts,” said Bill Edwards, director of the Victor Valley Rescue Mission in California, a small town two hours north of Los Angeles. “You’ll have a small dollar store or whatever, and they might take benefits, so people are able to go there and shop. But they’re not getting something healthy at that store, right? There is no fresh fruit and vegetable aisle in the dollar store. There’s no access to healthier foods.”

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BILL EDWARDS
Director of the Victor Valley Rescue Mission | California



Programs That Feed Kids: How Families are Making Ends Meet

Being able to depend on the support of friends and family is important in rural communities. In addition, a variety of programs are available to help low-income families, both through the federal government and through charitable organizations. Program participants in rural areas value these needed services.

Some of the programs important to families:

- **FOOD BANKS & FOOD PANTRIES:** Many low-income families rely on charitable food assistance programs like these or free meals offered through faith-based organizations, shelters and other community groups. Our research showed that people especially appreciated programs that offered choices, as well as meat, fresh fruits and fresh vegetables. However, families also reported challenges, including limited hours of operation and distance, required paperwork, and food quantity and quality.
- **SNAP:** The nation's largest food assistance program, SNAP, helps 20 million children. Families in the study described the program as being a big help. However, interviews revealed that a new job or a raise in wages can affect SNAP benefits and leave families still struggling to afford enough food.
- **WIC:** This federal program provides young children and new and expectant mothers with critical nutrition. Families in the study spoke highly of WIC customer service, access to nutrition education and wellness checks. The move from paper vouchers to electronic cards was welcome, as it reduced some of the stigma of paying for groceries.
- **SCHOOL BREAKFAST:** This program available nationwide helps ensure students get a healthy morning meal. Families affirmed the importance of school breakfast but noted that a major challenge is getting children to school early enough in order to make it in time for breakfast, as school breakfast is traditionally offered before the bell rings.
- **AFTERSCHOOL MEALS:** Federal programs offer free meals or snacks to children through schools or community sites after the school day ends. Parents in our study spoke positively about afterschool meals and many wanted to participate. However, some were not certain whether the program was available nearby and others said their existing afterschool activities do not offer meals or snacks. Some families preferred to serve traditional meals for dinner at home.
- **SUMMER MEALS:** Federal programs provide free meals served to children 18 and under at schools or community sites during the summer. Summer meals were viewed positively by parents, as the summer months can be a struggle for families whose children rely on free meals at school. However, families in rural areas reported that transportation to a summer meals site was a barrier to participation—a free meal program available at a school or public library may not be accessible to kids living 10 miles away whose parents work during the day.

Another barrier—for food banks, as well as other programs—is the stigma that some families may feel about asking for help. Some acknowledged that stigma could be a barrier to getting help. Some also worry more about running into someone they know and being recognized at a food pantry in sparsely-populated rural areas.

“It’s really disheartening, because a lot of people that you see there you didn’t realize were in the same situation that you are in, and then there’s a lot of people with kids there that need this,” said Tina, a mom from West Virginia, about her experience at a local food bank. “It’s sad, because you know that this is what they rely on. You see so many people wanting and needing these assistances. So, it’s sad. I’m getting all teared up. Emotional. And you don’t talk about it, you know; of course, you don’t.”

Our research also showed that parents use programs strategically, combining different benefits to help create a more secure environment for their children. Many families who are enrolled in multiple assistance programs use WIC benefits to get staple food items for younger children and mothers, and SNAP benefits to get other groceries, while relying on food pantries or faith-based programs towards the end of the month when federal benefits run low.

What We Can Do to Help

Understanding the causes of rural food insecurity is critical to ensuring no child goes hungry in America. Building upon the current study’s findings, we have some immediate recommendations:

- **Make breakfast part of the school day.** We encourage schools in rural areas to adopt “breakfast after the bell” programs. Our study confirmed that parents value school breakfast programs, but find it difficult to get their children to school early. By providing breakfast after the bell, schools can ensure more students in rural areas can start the morning with a healthy meal.
- **Improve summer meals.** Our study found that transportation to summer meal sites is a major barrier to participation for rural children. Making the rules governing the summer meals program more flexible could give community groups more ways reach children despite these barriers, including changing the requirement that children consume food on-site and expanding access to other meal options, such as the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program.
- **Offer culturally appropriate meals.** To reach more children, we recommend that schools and community programs serve culturally appropriate, appealing foods at their school breakfast, afterschool meals, summer meals and charitable food assistance programs (e.g. food pantries, meals offered through faith-based organizations, etc.). Likewise, for charitable food programs, the client choice model, which allows families to choose the food that they take home, can encourage participation.



- **Offer healthy foods.** Recipients of charitable food, in particular, expressed a desire for more fresh and healthy foods, including proteins, dairy, fruits and vegetables.
- **Conduct more research.** In addition to strengthening food and nutrition programs, future research could dive deeper into broader efforts to improve economic opportunities and increase food access in local rural economies.

Details & Methodology

Feeding America and Share Our Strength (the nonprofit that runs the No Kid Hungry campaign) joined with a team of researchers from six universities, led by Dr. Lindsey Haynes-Maslow of North Carolina State University, on a qualitative study to explore what makes it easier or harder for families in rural areas to provide food for their kids. This study, conducted in early 2019 via interviews with 153 participants in six rural counties, is the first in-depth exploration of its kind.

For the purposes of this study, a county was considered rural if it had a USDA Rural-Urban-Continuum-Code (RUCC) of 4 or greater; this is defined as 20,000 or more residents, adjacent to an urban population. One county was chosen from each of six states: Arkansas, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and West Virginia. The selected counties were diverse in terms of geographic region, racial/ethnic composition, experience of persistent poverty, recent natural disasters and political leaning. All had above average rates of child food insecurity.

Additional quantitative data in this report, included for context, comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Census Bureau, and the work of Dr. James Ziliak of the University of Kentucky.

A number of direct quotes appear in this document. Quotes from low-income parents are taken directly from our research, though names and identifying details have been changed to protect their anonymity. Quotes from service providers are not from the research study, but from interviews conducted at No Kid Hungry's 2019 Rural Child Hunger summit in Louisville, Kentucky.

The research brief that describes the qualitative study can be found [here](#). For a PDF copy of the research brief that describes the qualitative study, or with any questions about this report, please contact Karen Wong of the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices, at kwong@strength.org or Emily Engelhard from Feeding America Research, at research@feedingamerica.org.

