



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

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



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

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

**WHAT IS THE  
POVERTY LINE?**  
**~\$25,100**  
for a family of four

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

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



## Who is food insecure in the United States?



**15 million**

households, including



**6 million**

households with **children**



**3 million**

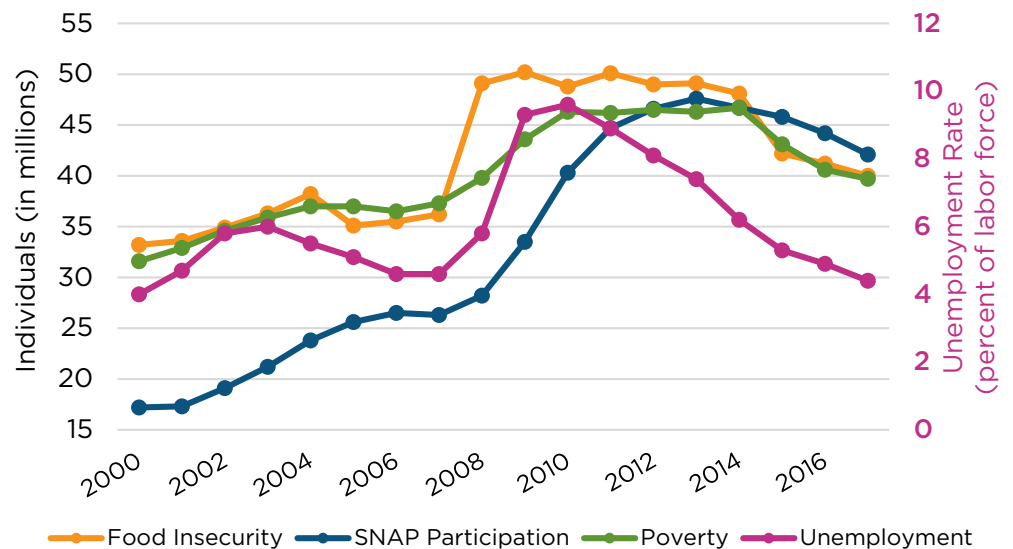
households with a **senior**



## Food Insecurity

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

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

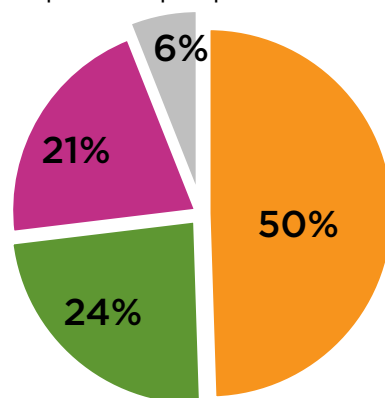


Since 2014, **poverty**, **unemployment**, and **food insecurity** have declined each year. Economic improvement among households over the past 4 years also correlates with a reduced participation in **SNAP**.

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

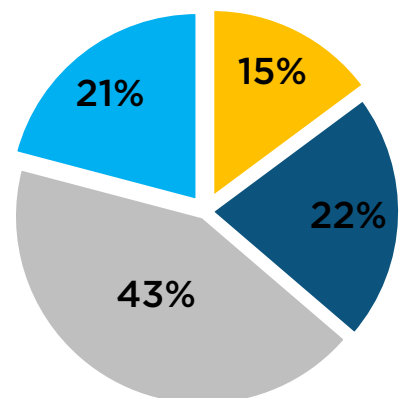
When looking across racial groups or regions, additional disparities emerge. For example, although half of food-insecure households are White, they represent **1 in 11 White households** in the U.S. compared to **nearly 1 in 5 African American** and **1 in 6 Latino** households who are food insecure.

Half of food-insecure households represent people of color



- White, non-Hispanic
- African American, non-Hispanic
- Hispanic
- Other race

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



- Northeast
- Midwest
- South
- West

- Due to rounding, estimates may not total 100%

# Income and Poverty

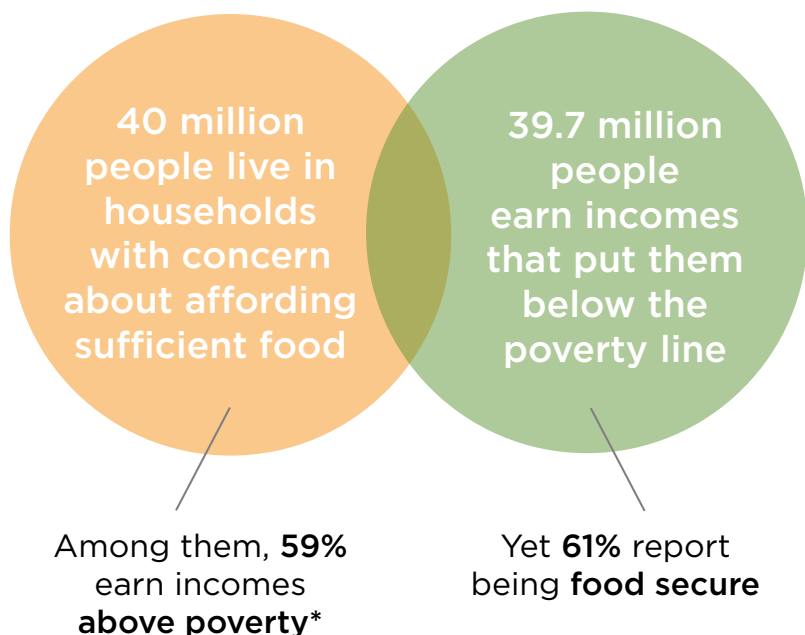
In 2017, U.S. households experienced a 1.8% increase in median income (\$61,372), the third consecutive increase since the Great Recession.

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

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

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

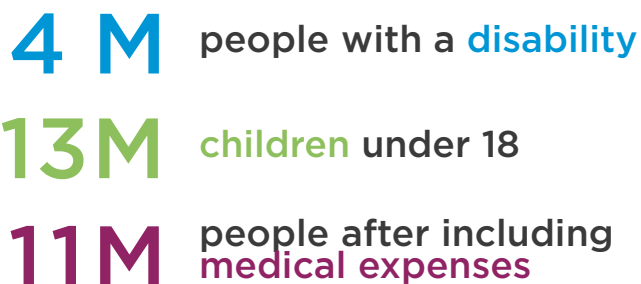
Food insecurity and poverty are not always experienced by the same families



\*Among food insecure households whose income is known.

## Who lives in poverty in the United States?

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



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

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

Following the SPM...

Social Security prevented

27 million

EITC and child tax credits precluded

8 million

SNAP benefits stopped

3 million

people from living below the poverty line.





Feeding America leads the fight against hunger in the United States by supporting programs that improve food security among the people we serve; educating the public about the problem of hunger; and advocating for legislation that protects people from going hungry.



Member food banks reaching every community in the United States



Food pantries and meal programs partnering with local food banks



Meals provided to children, seniors, and families each year



## Implications

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

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

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

Our recommendations include:

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

## References

- Coleman-Jensen, A., et al. (2018). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2017*. U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.
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- Fox, L. (2018). *The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2017*. U.S. Census Bureau.
- Fontenot, K., Semega, J., and Kollar, M., U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-263, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2017*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2018.

## Other Resources

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