

Rural Hunger in Inland Northwest

Second Harvest

Individuals and families living in rural areas frequently face hunger and food insecurity at higher rates. There are many factors that contribute to this trend in communities; many are a result of the unique challenges living in remote area causes. Some of these challenges include an increased probability of food deserts, absence of job opportunities, low-wage incomes, and higher rates of unemployment. Rural counties make up 63% of all United States counties, but also account for 76% of counties with high food insecurity rates that rank in the top 10% of all counties. According to Feeding America, 2.8 million rural households face hunger.

Second Harvest feeds hungry people in 26 counties in Eastern Washington and North Idaho (Inland Northwest) – a mostly rural service territory that spans 51,000 square feet. 23ⁱ of these counties are considered to be rural. In fact, 45% of all food distributed by Second Harvest goes to rural counties and that percentage continues to increase. That is 12,609,970 pounds of food given to rural areas. Specifically, 49% of all produce and 46% of perishable products are distributed to the rural counties within the Inland Northwest. Last year, Franklin and Yakima counties were distributed the most food. These two counties alone account for 40% of the rural food distributed by Second Harvest.

The rural counties in the Inland Northwest with the highest food insecurity rates are Whitman at 19.9%, Ferry County at 18%, Pend Oreille County at 17.1%, Kittitas at 16.3%, and Stevens County at 16.0%. All of these counties face significantly higher food insecurity rates than the Washington State (12.8%) and the national (13.4%) average. Of the Washington Inland Northwest 91,930 people are food insecure. These counties account for 10% of all food insecure people in Washington. Within Idaho Inland Northwest 11,930 people are food insecure. This totals to be 103,860 food insecure people within the rural counties of the Inland Northwest. That is 46% of the food insecure people in Second Harvest's service area.

Children are particularly more likely to face hunger in rural counties. The child food insecurity rates in rural counties are notably high. One in five children lack consistent access to food. Pend Oreille County has a child food insecurity rate of 27.5% and Stevens has a rate of 25.5%. One in three children in Pend Oreille County faces regular food shortages at home. The rural counties in total have 52,190 food insecure children. Hunger can leave lasting damage to a child's development. Hunger puts children at risk for range of problems such as cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and physical. Cuts to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (Food Stamps) will only further increase the number of people at risk of hunger.

Farming and agriculture is a trend among rural America. Small-scale farmers can often times be the heart of these rural counties. Without many other high paying jobs available, this tends to be the most common way to earn a living. But even though agriculture products sold is high; the residents within these counties are not seeing the return. Often times these counties are left with high unemployment rates and poverty levels further contributing to the increase rates of food insecurity.

The correlation between unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity rate is undeniable. Studies performed by the USDA found that as the unemployment rate increases so does the rate of food insecurity or specifically “an increase of 1 percentage point in the unemployment rate (measured as the highest monthly unemployment rate in the past calendar year) was associated with an increase of 0.5 percentage point in the prevalence of food insecurity.” USDA and Feeding America both report that living below the poverty line is a noteworthy risk factor for dealing with food insecurity. A USDA study reports that food insecurity “was strongly associated with household income and employment. For example, households with incomes 1.5 times the poverty line were about 6 percentage points less likely to be food insecure than households with incomes at half the poverty line.” The poverty levels in a majority of the Inland Northwest rural counties are staggeringly higher than the national (13.5%) average. The range of poverty levels is Chelan County at the lowest of 12.7% and Shoshone County at the highest of 21.1%. Unemployment rates in these counties are also high with the lowest being 4.8% at Whitman County and the highest being 11.5% in Ferry County. The national unemployment rate is only 4.3%. The heightened levels of unemployment and poverty in the rural counties increase the struggles for residents.

Since these locations can be difficult to reach and stationary food banks could be hours away, there is dependency on mobile food banks to supply these rural areas with food. And with the lower population density, a range of businesses and services simply cannot thrive in the area. This means that residents of these rural communities are left to commute many miles for work, grocery stores, access medical care, and other essential needs. Second Harvest ensures that these food banks have an adequate amount of food supplied. Second Harvest supplies 55,000 hungry people with food each week in both rural and urban counties. Second Harvest’s Mobile Food Bank has filled pockets of unmet needs in rural areas. The Mobile Food Bank is a refrigerated truck filled with fresh produce and other groceries. For a few hours, volunteers distribute the food to people in need. This is just one of the many services and programs Second Harvest provides to combat hunger within our communities. Without this access many people and families would be left to go hungry.

ⁱ **Washington:** Adams, Asotin, Chelan, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Franklin, Garfield, Grant, Kittias, Klickitat, Lincoln, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, Skamania, Stevens, Walla Walla, Whitman, Yakima
Idaho: Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, Shoshone