

## CHILD HUNGER AND NUTRITION

# 1 in 5

THE PROPORTION OF CHILDREN  
IN THE U.S. LIVING IN  
FOOD-INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS



Children's physical health and brain development depend on them being well-fed, particularly in the earliest years of life. Hunger and malnutrition jeopardize children's health, development, education and career readiness. In 2015 nearly 1 in 5 children—14.8 million—lived in food-insecure households, lacking consistent access to adequate food and placing them at an increased risk of obesity.<sup>1</sup> In 2016 more than 1 in 4 children were overweight or obese in 44 states and the District of Columbia (see **Table 10**).

- The percent of Black (27 percent) and Hispanic households with food-insecure children (24 percent) was two times more than the percent of White households with food-insecure children (14 percent).<sup>2</sup>
- During 2010-11, 75 percent of households with food-insecure children had at least one adult in the labor force; 60 percent had a full-time worker.<sup>3</sup>

While government programs have helped reduce child hunger, existing programs fall short of meeting the needs of all children.

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, helps feed 19.9 million children—more than 1 in 4 (see **Table 11**). SNAP prevents children and families from going hungry, improves overall health, and reduces poverty among families receiving the benefit. Research also shows children with access to food stamps are nearly 20 percent more likely to complete high school.<sup>4</sup>
- SNAP lifted more than 1.5 million children out of poverty in 2016, more than any other government program.<sup>5</sup> However, SNAP benefits averaged only \$1.41 a person per meal.<sup>6</sup> More than half of all families receiving SNAP in 2015 were still food-insecure.<sup>7</sup>
- In FY2015, 4.9 million households had no income except for SNAP benefits, including 1.3 million households with children.<sup>8</sup>

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs help keep children fed and ready to learn in the classroom.

- During the 2015-2016 school year, 21.6 million children received free or reduced-price school lunch and 12.1 million received free or reduced-price breakfast (see **Table 12**).
- More than 18,000 high-poverty schools—serving meals to more than 8.5 million students—participated in the community eligibility option, allowing them to serve all students without the administrative burden of taking applications and collecting meal fees.<sup>9</sup> This enabled these schools to invest time and resources in building stronger school nutrition programs that reach more students.<sup>10</sup>
- Research shows children who were food-insecure in kindergarten saw a 13 percent drop in their reading and math scores by third grade compared with their food-secure peers.<sup>11</sup>

Hunger does not take a summer vacation, however, and many children do not receive healthy meals during summer months (see **Table 12**).

- In summer 2016, the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option through the National School Lunch Program served only 15 percent of children who received free or reduced-price lunch during the 2015-2016 school year.<sup>12</sup>
- To address barriers to children accessing summer meals, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service has been piloting innovative strategies in diverse communities. Three successful strategies are:<sup>13</sup>
  - Mobile vans to provide meals, particularly in rural areas.
  - The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children program, which offered families cards with funds to purchase extra food for their children during the summer. A study found a \$60 monthly benefit (per child) reduced the percent of children experiencing “very low food security” by one-third and helped reduce food insecurity in the household overall.<sup>14</sup>
  - Food backpacks to provide meals for children on weekends and holidays when Summer Food Service Program sites were not open.<sup>15</sup>

### Infants and Toddlers Are Particularly Vulnerable to Food Insecurity

- Good nutrition during the first three years of life is critical to a healthy start.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding postpartum women. Infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk are also eligible during these critical early years.
- WIC served 7.8 million women, infants and children during FY2015 and more than 1 in 5 children under age 5 (see **Table 11**).<sup>16</sup> WIC reduces the prevalence of child food insecurity by one-third and “very low food security” by at least two-thirds.<sup>17</sup> A study found positive long-term impacts of proper nutrition in early childhood: children who received WIC prenatally and/or in early life had significantly better reading and math scores years later in elementary school.<sup>18</sup>

In 2015, 20 states and the District of Columbia had nearly 1 in 5 children living in food-insecure households. Food insecurity increases the risk of obesity. In 2016, more than 1 in 4 children were overweight or obese in 19 of those states and the District of Columbia as well as 26 other states.

**Table 10: Child Hunger and Obesity, 2015-2016**

	Children Living in Food-Insecure Households, 2015 <sup>a</sup>		Percent of Children 10–17 Overweight or Obese, 2016	State Rank	
	Number	Percent		Based on Child Food Insecurity Rate	Based on Percent Overweight and Obese
Alabama	267,040	24.1%	35.5%	47	42
Alaska	36,560	19.6	26.3	29	24
Arizona	389,850	24.0	26.9	46	47
Arkansas	176,710	25.0	33.9	48	40
California	1,890,050	20.7	31.2	32	26
Colorado	207,650	16.5	27.2	10	2
Connecticut	127,400	16.7	30.2	11	22
Delaware	35,310	17.3	30.9	15	32
District of Columbia	27,800	23.6	33.8	–	–
Florida	930,730	22.7	36.6	42	13
Georgia	580,830	23.2	32.2	43	42
Hawaii	62,600	20.1	25.5	31	12
Idaho	76,070	17.6	26.0	17	14
Illinois	513,270	17.3	27.0	15	38
Indiana	301,990	19.1	33.9	26	29
Iowa	121,550	16.7	29.9	11	15
Kansas	138,480	19.2	30.9	27	25
Kentucky	202,050	20.0	33.5	30	44
Louisiana	261,230	23.4	34.0	44	50
Maine	54,830	21.4	28.2	36	21
Maryland	220,010	16.3	33.6	8	31
Massachusetts	187,290	13.5	26.6	3	27
Michigan	397,070	18.0	32.0	19	34
Minnesota	177,080	13.8	27.7	4	11
Mississippi	191,750	26.3	37.0	50	49
Missouri	258,610	18.6	29.4	23	17
Montana	42,480	18.8	23.2	24	20
Nebraska	85,970	18.3	29.2	22	19
Nevada	149,460	22.4	30.5	38	36
New Hampshire	33,940	12.9	23.8	2	5
New Jersey	298,010	14.9	31.7	6	4
New Mexico	124,980	25.0	24.9	48	35
New York	819,460	19.4	31.8	28	33
North Carolina	516,120	22.6	30.9	40	29
North Dakota	16,130	9.4	37.1	1	45
Ohio	575,020	21.9	33.1	37	28
Oklahoma	216,980	22.6	33.8	40	39
Oregon	194,070	22.5	20.3	39	7
Pennsylvania	482,130	17.9	31.7	18	7
Rhode Island	38,430	18.1	36.3	21	16
South Carolina	225,550	20.7	32.9	32	48
South Dakota	37,670	18.0	31.4	19	9
Tennessee	315,370	21.1	37.7	35	41
Texas	1,713,430	23.8	33.3	45	46
Utah	149,790	16.4	19.2	9	1
Vermont	18,820	15.7	22.2	7	3
Virginia	268,670	14.4	27.2	5	23
Washington	306,560	19.0	25.5	25	6
West Virginia	79,050	20.8	35.1	34	37
Wisconsin	219,280	17.0	29.5	14	18
Wyoming	23,550	16.9	27.1	13	10
<b>United States</b>	<b>14,784,730</b>	<b>19.3%</b>	<b>31.2%</b>		

<sup>a</sup>Food-insecure households are households with children that had difficulty meeting basic food needs for adults, children or both.

<sup>b</sup>Overweight is defined as BMI-for-age between the 85th and 95th percentile; obese is defined as BMI-for-age greater than or equal to the 95th percentile.

Sources: Gunderson, Craig, Adam Dewey, Amy S. Crumbaugh, Michael Kato, and Emily Engelhard. 2017. “Map the Meal Gap 2017: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2015.” Feeding America. <http://www.feedingamerica.org/research/map-the-meal-gap/2015/2015-mapthemealgap-exec-summary.pdf>; 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health. 2017. “Indicator 1.4: Childhood Weight Status in 4 Categories, Age 10-17 Years.” Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. <http://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=4576&r=1>.

In FY2015, more than 1 in 4 children benefited from SNAP. More than 1 in 5 children under age 5 relied on WIC during years of critical development.

**Table 11: Average Monthly Number of Child Participants in SNAP and WIC, FY2015**

	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), FY2015			Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), FY2015 <sup>a</sup>			
	Number	Percent of:		Number of:			Percent of All Children under 5
		All Children	All SNAP Participants	All Participants	Infants <sup>b</sup>	Children under 5 <sup>b</sup>	
Alabama	397,000	34.1%	44.8%	132,133	34,775	64,475	22.0%
Alaska	35,000	17.9	43.7	19,682	4,515	10,482	19.1
Arizona	478,000	27.9	48.5	148,208	39,230	73,173	16.8
Arkansas	200,000	26.8	43.9	84,220	23,581	38,700	20.3
California	2,319,000	24.0	53.4	1,265,005	259,419	720,450	28.8
Colorado	235,000	17.7	48.0	90,733	21,761	46,453	13.8
Connecticut	154,000	18.9	35.3	51,295	12,953	27,135	14.5
Delaware	66,000	30.5	45.0	18,998	5,053	9,615	17.4
District of Columbia	51,000	40.1	36.4	14,526	4,199	6,511	15.0
Florida	1,448,000	33.4	39.6	483,811	119,920	244,874	22.0
Georgia	809,000	30.6	45.2	264,299	65,545	132,330	20.0
Hawaii	74,000	22.8	40.2	31,616	7,402	16,704	18.1
Idaho	95,000	20.9	49.0	40,506	9,796	20,598	18.1
Illinois	843,000	27.0	41.9	247,594	68,208	120,039	15.4
Indiana	379,000	22.8	46.7	154,485	39,032	78,826	18.7
Iowa	167,000	21.6	43.1	63,481	16,300	32,077	16.2
Kansas	130,000	17.2	47.7	62,850	15,817	32,471	16.5
Kentucky	313,000	29.3	41.2	116,179	30,229	58,324	21.2
Louisiana	407,000	34.7	47.6	128,935	37,558	58,117	18.7
Maine	70,000	25.6	34.8	21,615	5,129	11,833	18.3
Maryland	322,000	22.6	41.8	142,841	34,217	74,416	20.2
Massachusetts	268,000	18.1	34.9	113,262	25,875	61,513	16.9
Michigan	582,000	24.8	37.2	244,829	60,862	129,715	22.6
Minnesota	216,000	16.0	45.2	119,403	26,956	65,058	18.6
Mississippi	277,000	36.1	43.7	88,715	25,771	41,381	21.7
Missouri	365,000	24.9	43.4	134,780	36,453	64,048	17.1
Montana	48,000	20.1	42.2	18,476	4,624	9,416	15.1
Nebraska	85,000	17.1	49.5	36,960	9,191	19,312	14.7
Nevada	179,000	25.5	44.0	71,706	17,415	37,637	20.8
New Hampshire	41,000	14.6	40.1	14,705	3,650	7,728	12.0
New Jersey	397,000	18.8	44.1	161,664	36,584	88,112	16.7
New Mexico	206,000	39.4	46.4	52,146	12,724	26,716	20.3
New York	1,050,000	23.5	35.3	471,695	107,962	251,167	21.4
North Carolina	696,000	28.7	43.2	248,245	61,242	127,587	21.1
North Dakota	23,000	12.5	44.1	11,481	2,993	5,808	10.7
Ohio	693,000	24.9	42.1	244,201	65,871	120,473	17.3
Oklahoma	267,000	26.4	45.8	86,496	21,668	43,117	16.1
Oregon	275,000	30.2	35.6	98,304	21,599	53,303	22.9
Pennsylvania	734,000	25.7	40.3	245,979	64,921	126,168	17.7
Rhode Island	66,000	29.1	38.0	20,728	5,225	10,902	19.9
South Carolina	366,000	31.7	45.9	114,562	32,352	51,665	17.7
South Dakota	46,000	20.7	47.3	17,515	4,225	9,396	15.4
Tennessee	515,000	32.6	42.4	150,116	42,284	67,650	16.7
Texas	2,060,000	27.1	55.6	886,409	219,016	430,242	21.5
Utah	118,000	12.3	53.1	58,995	13,865	30,426	12.1
Vermont	30,000	23.1	35.0	13,733	2,597	8,247	26.9
Virginia	376,000	19.0	44.8	139,632	36,708	68,180	13.3
Washington	412,000	24.3	39.0	176,133	36,213	99,345	22.2
West Virginia	137,000	34.2	37.9	41,701	10,765	20,945	20.5
Wisconsin	316,000	23.1	39.9	105,504	25,498	56,437	16.7
Wyoming	16,000	10.9	49.8	10,414	2,446	5,356	13.8
<b>United States</b>	<b>19,891,000</b>	<b>25.6%</b>	<b>44.0%</b>	<b>7,781,498</b>	<b>1,892,192</b>	<b>4,014,651</b>	<b>20.2%</b>

<sup>a</sup>Average monthly participation data from October 2014 to September 2015. All data are preliminary and subject to revision.

<sup>b</sup>Excludes participation from Indian tribal organizations.

Sources: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. 2017. "Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2015," Table B.14. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/Characteristics2015.pdf>; U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2017. "WIC Program Data: Monthly Data-State Level Participation by Category and Program Costs - FY2015 (Final)." <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wicmain.htm>; U.S. Census Bureau. 2017. "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States and States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2016," Table PEPASR6H.

During the 2015-2016 school year, 21.6 million children received free or reduced-price lunch, but only 3 million received meals in summer 2016. In 43 states, more than 4 in 5 children who received free or reduced-price lunch did not participate in Summer Nutrition Programs.

**Table 12: School and Summer Feeding Programs, 2015-2016 School Year and Summer 2016**

	Number of Children Participating in:			Percent of Children Who Both Receive Free or Reduced-Price Lunch and Participate in Summer Nutrition Programs	Rank Based on Percent of Children Who Both Receive Free or Reduced-Price Lunch and Participate in Summer Nutrition Programs <sup>a</sup>
	Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	Free and Reduced-Price Breakfast	Summer Nutrition Programs		
Alabama	396,936	229,658	37,879	9.5%	39
Alaska <sup>b</sup>	39,519	21,678	3,994	10.1	36
Arizona	496,205	267,331	57,533	11.6	30
Arkansas	244,295	155,102	28,921	11.8	29
California	2,620,828	1,457,976	456,607	17.4	12
Colorado	245,238	147,469	20,271	8.3	45
Connecticut	170,023	87,405	37,303	21.9	6
Delaware <sup>b</sup>	66,712	41,038	10,211	15.3	18
District of Columbia <sup>b</sup>	47,396	31,956	21,711	45.8	–
Florida	1,412,090	713,159	220,486	15.6	16
Georgia	937,730	552,290	141,784	15.1	21
Hawaii	66,811	28,733	6,767	10.1	36
Idaho	101,748	60,406	20,423	20.1	7
Illinois	834,033	397,513	91,504	11.0	33
Indiana	454,579	230,666	68,151	15.0	22
Iowa	183,782	80,783	19,990	10.9	34
Kansas	199,981	98,672	17,187	8.6	44
Kentucky <sup>b</sup>	418,362	268,501	32,243	7.7	46
Louisiana	424,196	244,944	37,594	8.9	42
Maine	62,780	37,205	16,157	25.7	4
Maryland	318,138	204,388	70,391	22.1	5
Massachusetts	338,138	167,206	56,376	16.7	14
Michigan <sup>b</sup>	577,101	335,506	64,422	11.2	31
Minnesota	290,611	154,415	44,497	15.3	18
Mississippi	321,730	188,976	24,105	7.5	48
Missouri	385,156	228,397	35,208	9.1	41
Montana <sup>b</sup>	49,357	26,161	9,022	18.3	10
Nebraska	123,113	52,914	9,017	7.3	49
Nevada	184,083	103,197	20,364	11.1	32
New Hampshire	39,069	15,977	5,531	14.2	24
New Jersey	456,695	267,756	80,915	17.7	11
New Mexico <sup>b</sup>	184,771	134,640	61,999	33.6	1
New York	1,256,466	615,689	352,265	28.0	3
North Carolina	694,359	398,591	102,769	14.8	23
North Dakota <sup>b</sup>	32,538	15,991	3,166	9.7	38
Ohio	671,836	374,043	62,939	9.4	40
Oklahoma	326,981	191,994	16,992	5.2	50
Oregon	227,160	121,386	34,455	15.2	20
Pennsylvania	659,969	326,395	89,745	13.6	27
Rhode Island	54,262	27,829	10,239	18.9	8
South Carolina	371,443	231,343	69,466	18.7	9
South Dakota	52,663	24,286	8,237	15.6	16
Tennessee <sup>b</sup>	527,726	340,369	65,713	12.5	28
Texas	2,564,138	1,619,173	195,681	7.6	47
Utah	171,095	65,246	28,294	16.5	15
Vermont	27,642	17,331	9,041	32.7	2
Virginia	441,165	248,045	62,703	14.2	24
Washington	362,299	163,362	37,530	10.4	35
West Virginia <sup>b</sup>	133,241	111,724	11,879	8.9	42
Wisconsin	300,006	153,208	42,391	14.1	26
Wyoming <sup>b</sup>	26,353	11,264	4,585	17.4	12
<b>United States</b>	<b>21,592,548</b>	<b>12,089,287</b>	<b>3,036,653</b>	<b>14.6%</b>	

<sup>a</sup>States are ranked 1-50 with 1 meaning a high percent of children who receive free or reduced-price lunch also participate in Summer Nutrition Programs and 50 meaning a low percent of children who receive free or reduced-price lunch also participate in Summer Nutrition Programs.

<sup>b</sup>In these states, 50 percent or more of eligible school districts adopted the Community Eligibility Provision for the 2015-2016 school year. Those high-poverty school districts were offering breakfast and lunch at no charge to all students without having to collect and process individual meal applications. That was the first school year the provision became available nationwide after being piloted in 11 states.

Notes: Participation data are based on average daily meals served from September through May for the School Lunch and Breakfast Programs and in July for the Summer Nutrition Program.

Sources: Segal, Becca, Jessie Hewins, Mieka Sanderson, Catlin Nchako, Zoë Neuberger, Lexin Cai, and Alison Maurice. 2016. "Community Eligibility Adoption Rises for the 2015-2016 School Year, Increasing Access to School Meals." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Food and Research Action Center. <http://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/4-7-16fa.pdf>; Hewins, Jessie, and Randy Rosso. 2017. "School Breakfast Scorecard: 2015-2016 School Year." Food Research and Action Center. <http://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/school-breakfast-scorecard-sy-2015-2016.pdf>; FitzSimmons, Crystal, Signe Anderson, Clarissa Hayes, and Randy Rosso. 2017. "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report." Food Research and Action Center. <http://www.frac.org/wp-content/uploads/2017-summer-nutrition-report-1.pdf>; U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2017. "National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served." <https://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>.