

**Teen Food Insecurity**  
Presentation to Urban School Food Alliance

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## Food Insecurity Persists, Despite an Improving Economy

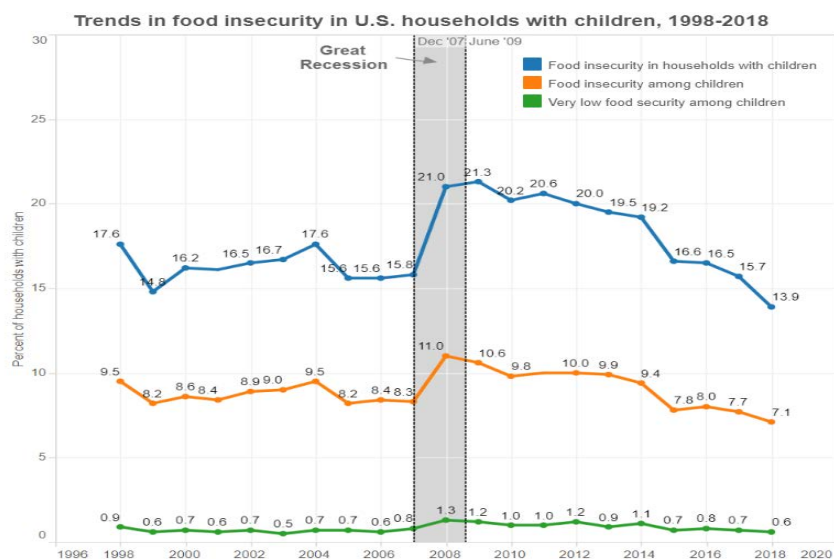
- In 2018, more than 37 million individuals were food insecure in the US
- There are 11.2 million children living in food insecure households
  - USDA does not publish detailed data on food insecurity among older children, but analysis of the most recent CPS data suggests there are about **5.3 million food-insecure children ages 10-17**

Urban analysis of CPS 2018 Food Security Supplement data

## How Is Food Insecurity Measured?

- A household's food insecurity status is based on responses to 18 questions in the Core Food Security Module (CFSM)
- Examples of questions:
  - "I worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more"
  - "Did you or the other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?"
  - "Were you ever hungry but did not eat because you couldn't afford enough food?"
  - "Did a child in the household ever not eat for a full day because you couldn't afford enough food?"

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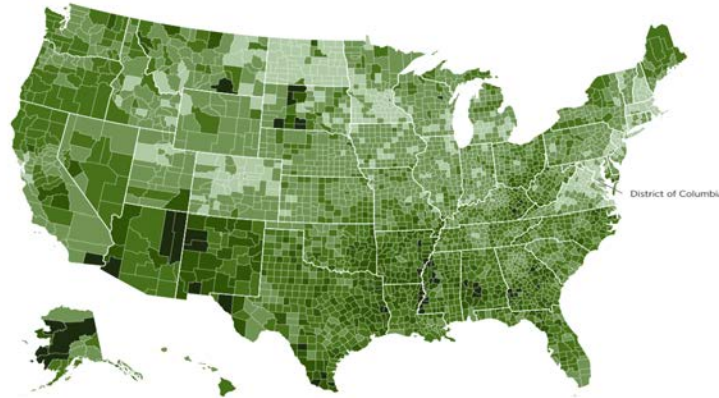


Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service, using Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data.  
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/>

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## Mapping Food Insecurity among Households with Children

The United States



2017 Child County Food Insecurity in The United States

Food Insecurity Rates

4-14%

15-19%

20-24%

25-29%

30%+

Source: <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>

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## The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey Finds Higher Rates of Food Insecurity

- Share of adults in households with at least one child ages **10-17** reporting food insecurity: 24.7%
- Share of adults in households using charitable food that have at least one child ages **10-17**: 31.8%

Source: WBNS December 2018

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## Why Teen Food Insecurity Matters

- Food insecurity in adolescents is associated with increased odds of mood, anxiety, behavior, and substance abuse disorders in adolescents
- Food-insecure adolescents are more likely to report having had dysthymia (persistent depressive disorder) and three measures of suicidal ideation— having thoughts of death; having had a desire to die; and having attempted suicide

Sources: McLaughlin et al. 2012; Alaimo et al. 2002

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## Other Health Challenges Associated with Food Insecurity

Lower levels of self-reported health	Iron deficiency
Poor sleep outcomes	Dental caries
Complications with asthma	Worse diabetes self-efficacy
Chronic disease	Poor glucose control
Poor glycemic control	Lower nutrient intakes
Higher cardiovascular disease risk	Being bullied
Loss of vision due to diabetic retinopathy	

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## Key Findings from Teen Focus Groups in 10 Communities across US

- Teen food insecurity is widespread
- Teens fear stigma around hunger and actively hide it as much as they can

Popkin et al. 2016; Waxman et al. 2016

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## Awareness of Peer Struggles

*“A lot of students struggle on the weekends, because they’re not at school, and they don’t have food to eat.” ... “And it’s kind of sad, because there’s some people that like basically live on the school lunches . . . Some people ask us every single day for food [at school]. And then on the weekends they’ll just eat it all, because they have no food. And then, especially when that summer rolls around, and it’s not okay at all.”*

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## Teens and Stigma

*“And they don’t want people to know that their family, they might be struggling and then just call them poor and everything and make fun of them.”*

*“Some people on the outside don’t take the issue gently. I’ve heard some people can get their families taken away if they can’t afford to care for them, so you have to be careful.”*

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## Additional Insights from Teen Focus Groups

- Teens are active participants in family food acquisition and management strategies
- Food-insecure teens strategize about how to mitigate their hunger and make food last longer for the whole family.
- Although parents try to protect teens from hunger and from bearing responsibility for providing for themselves or others, teens in food-insecure families also routinely take on this role.

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## Teens Try to Shield Family Members from Food Insecurity

*“Especially if you have younger siblings. I feel like just knowing if food’s running low, it’s pressure on me because I feel like they need to eat, they can’t go without eating, they shouldn’t be going through not having food on the table every day.”*

*“Then try my friends or something, that live close by, see if I can get at least like two packs of noodles or something so we can all split it or something. Or I will go without a meal if that the case, as long as they, as long as my two young siblings is good, that’s all that really matters to me.”*

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## Coping by Choosing Quantity over Quality

- *“Income has a lot to do with it. When you’re on a budget for a certain amount of family members, you’re only gonna get what’s gonna last a while and feed all of you. If you have a lot of money, you can get whatever you want.”*
- *“People want stuff that will last longer and [is] cheaper versus what is better for them.”*
- *“What I don’t like the most is all the vegetables and fruit, all the healthy stuff is expensive while all the junk food is cheaper and that’s why most Americans are overweight.”*

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## Coping Strategies that Involve Personal Risk

Some teens facing serious deprivation may turn to higher-risk strategies:

- Transactional relationships with older adults
- Getting arrested to have a place to sleep and eat
- Intentionally failing a class to have access to summer school meals
- Criminal activity, such as stealing, to afford basic needs

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## Teens Have a Lot of Opinions About School Meals

- *“But at my school, we eat cold lunch every day. We ain’t had no hot lunch since the beginning of the school year.”*
- *“The stuff they give pre-K kids, they give to big kids, and they don’t understand like big kids eat more than little kids eat. They need more.”*
- But they also see the value for those who struggle with food insecurity. One teen referred to school meals as *“life saving”* and they think more resources should be invested:
- *“I would say ‘hey, you have a million dollar football field. Let’s have a million dollars for food.’ “*

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## Teens' Ideas for How to Reach Teens

- **Combine food with other services.** Because teens are very sensitive to the stigma around asking for help, they believe food programs targeted to teens ideally should be combined with other types of activities so that attendance does not mean acknowledging food insecurity.
- **Make resources for teens struggling with food insecurity discreet.** *"Sometimes we don't want to be seen. So we want not to be seen, but also the pantry should be more accessible. Somewhere you can go without being looked at."*
- **Offer home delivery** for *"different areas where you know that people struggle, especially during summer, Christmas time, holidays in general."*

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## Teens' Ideas for How to Reach Teens

- **Improve outreach to teens on food insecurity and assistance.** Teens feel that they need more information and encouragement to get help; they feel there is a need to increase awareness and education among teens about food insecurity and programs that could help.
- *"Let it be known what they're trying to do, and where it is. And we're always on our phones, they should take it to social media,"*

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## Some Resources

Urban Institute Report: *Impossible Choices: Teens and Food Insecurity in America*

Feeding America/Urban Institute Collaborative Report: *Bringing Teens to the Table:  
A Focus on Food Insecurity in America*

Urban Institute Report: *Chicago Teen Food Literacy Curriculum*

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Thanks for all you do!



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