



# Hungry in Washington

September 2016

Hunger rates are improving, nationally and in Washington, but are still far higher than pre-recession levels. Washington is one of only five states with a significant improvement in very low food security over the prior year.

WA	Food Insecurity	State Rank	Very Low Food Security (hunger)	State Rank
2015	13.7%	28	5.5%	23
2016	12.9%	30	4.8%	33

## Food Insecurity:

*National:* Each fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) releases the most current data about food insecurity and hunger ("very low food security") across America. The report released on Sept. 7 shows that in 2015 **13.4% of Americans were food insecure** – in other words, **42.2 million Americans lived in households that struggle to eat three meals a day year round**. This is a statistically significant improvement from the previous year, when the national food insecurity rate was 15.4% of all Americans, but it is still **much higher than the pre-recession rate of 11.1%**. One very positive change is that, along with the overall decline in food insecurity, the rate of households with food insecure children dropped to pre-recession levels – it's the lowest rate since this survey began in 1998. This is positive news - but far more people are struggling now than before the recession, demonstrating again that economic recovery hasn't provided basic economic security for tens of millions of people.

*Washington:* In Washington, food insecurity rates have dropped from the previous year: 12.9% of residents were food insecure, compared to 13.7% previously. The difference between the national rate and Washington's rate of food insecurity is not statistically significant. Washington now ranks 30<sup>th</sup> among all states for food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

## Hunger – or, Very Low Food Security:

*National:* Food insecurity in the very severe range is called "very low food security" (hunger). This is a more specific assessment which includes skipping meals,

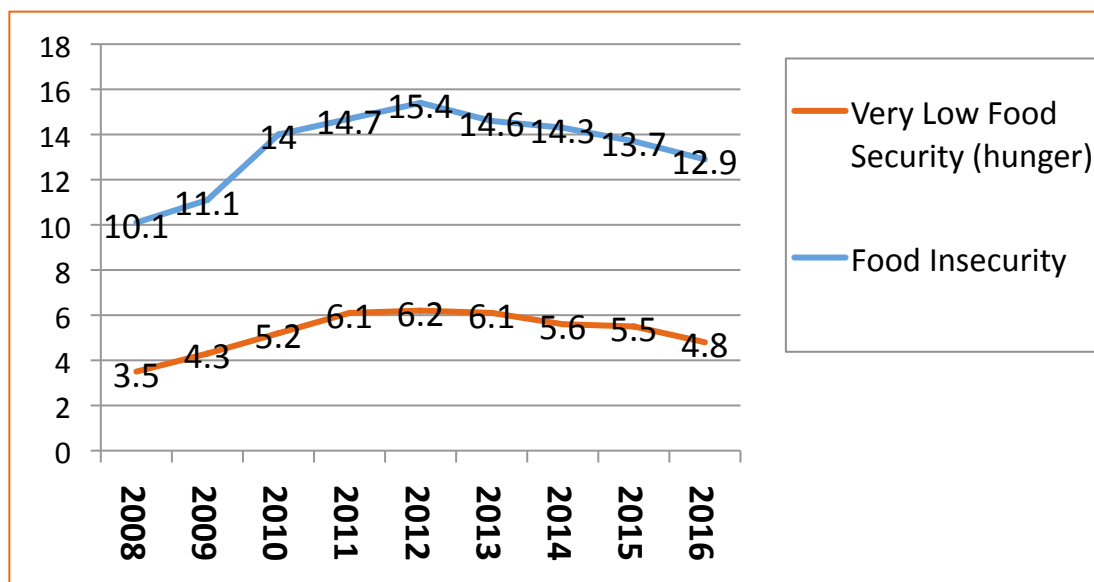
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<sup>1</sup> Mississippi ranks 1<sup>st</sup> (most food insecure); North Dakota ranks 51<sup>st</sup> (least food insecure).

compromised nutrition, and disrupted eating patterns throughout the year. In 2015, 5% (6.3 million) of all Americans experienced this severe food insecurity (hunger). Nationally, this rate is down significantly from the year before (5.6%). Unlike national food insecurity rates, with only one year's exception<sup>2</sup>, there have been no statistically significant improvements in U.S. hunger rates from 2008 until now.

*Washington:* In our state, 4.8% of all Washingtonians experienced hunger. Washington is one of only five states<sup>3</sup> in which the decline in hunger (very low food security) over the past few years has been statistically significant. Yet Washington's rate remains much higher than the pre-recession level of 3.5%. Washington now ranks 33<sup>rd</sup> in the U.S. for very low food security.

## Food Insecurity and Hunger in Washington



These hunger figures may project a far more optimistic snapshot of hunger than reality, underestimating the severity of hunger's impact nationally and in Washington: none of the data includes homeless individuals or families who are not reached by USDA's survey. In our state where there is an unequivocal homelessness crisis, this omission in the data should be taken seriously.

### Disproportionate Rates of Food Insecurity and Hunger:

The most significant factor affecting food security is poverty: nearly one-third (32.8%) of all households with incomes below 185% of federal poverty level<sup>4</sup> were food insecure.

<sup>2</sup> From 2008 to 2014, the national rate for very low food security has been 5.6% or 5.7% (an insignificant difference), with the exception of 2010 when it declined to 5.4%.

<sup>3</sup> States with a statistically significant decline in very low food security rates from 2010-12 and 2013-15 were: California, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland and Washington.

<sup>4</sup> For example, \$37,295/year for a family of three.

Yet families with children, Black households, and Hispanic households were living with hunger at far greater rates than average.

Childhood hunger has long-term consequences for babies' and children's development, academic performance, and lifelong health. Unfortunately, households with children are much more likely to be food insecure. Households with children who are headed by a single woman (30.3%) or a single man (22.4%) are among the very most likely to be food insecure. Regardless of family structure, 16.6% of *all* households with children experienced food insecurity - down significantly from 19.2% the previous year.

Not everyone in a food insecure home experiences hunger the same way: almost half the time in food insecure families, adults cut back or skip meals so that children don't lose out on the nutrition their growing bodies need. Yet in a particularly vulnerable subset of food insecure households, this doesn't happen and both children and adults are affected. In 3 million (7.8%) of *all* households with children, both the children and adults were food insecure.

Living alone also has a somewhat greater than average risk: 14.7% of women and 14% of men living alone were food insecure.

Race and ethnicity, like household structure, disproportionately affects hunger: though the national average rate of food insecurity was 12.7% and the rate for White/non-Hispanic households was 10%, for Black households the rate was 21.5% and for Hispanic households it was 19.1%. (No data were reported for Native American or Asian-Pacific Islander households.) With 7.9% of Black households and 6.4% of Hispanic households experiencing very low food security (hunger), these rates are also substantially higher than for White/non-Hispanic households (4.3%).

## Anti-Hunger Policy Recommendations:

### **1. Keep child nutrition programs effective by improving program access and preserving program structure in the reauthorization of Child Nutrition legislation in Congress.**

The historic decline in households with food insecure children is impressive and policymakers need to stay the course with what's working for babies and children. The House passed a Child Nutrition bill earlier this year that would dramatically limit access to critical programs like Community Eligibility for school meal programs, weaken the opportunity to offer year round out-of-school meal programs, and, most damagingly, pilot a change from an entitlement to a block grant for school breakfast and lunch. The bill also would sharply curtail the role of USDA in setting nutrition standards for programs. The Senate has yet to pass their bill that, in its current form,

contains significant improvements in programs like Summer Meals and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and maintains the Summer EBT pilot, Community Eligibility, and nutrition standards. Yet the bill also would change the rules for school meal applications, resulting in hundreds of thousands of eligible, low-income children losing out on subsidized school meals.

Congress should protect and strengthen these programs, and not roll back progress made in 2010's *Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act*.

## **2. Ensure food stamp benefits (SNAP) are available to all income-eligible people and are sufficient for a healthy diet.**

SNAP is the single most effective way to fight hunger, and Washington has one of the most effective programs in the country. However, benefit levels are frequently inadequate and renewed eligibility restrictions are in place so fewer low-income people are now eligible. Beginning this year, time limits were reinstated for certain unemployed adults (ABAWDs), many of whom are among the poorest in our state. Unless they meet certain job requirements, ABAWDs now are allowed only 3 months of benefits every 3 years. Yet even with full benefits, SNAP often doesn't meet households' needs: according to USDA, the average household spends 18% more than SNAP plans for, leaving too many without food at the end of the month.

Lawmakers should strengthen SNAP for all: avoid the time limit through waivers, increase client screening and access to work training, then eliminate the ABAWD restriction in next Farm Bill; restore eligibility for all legally residing immigrants in next Farm Bill; increase the minimum benefit from \$16/month; expand SNAP incentive programs like Washington's Fresh Bucks; and, use the Low Cost Food Plan to calculate SNAP benefit levels for all.

## **3. Make breakfast part of the school day – just like lunch – in Washington's highest poverty schools.**

Children have to work harder just to focus in school when they're hungry. Serving breakfast as part of the school day is proven to improve academic performance, attendance, behavior, and student health. Yet Washington ranks in the bottom ten states (45<sup>th</sup>) in reaching low-income students with a healthy school breakfast.

The Legislature should pass Breakfast After the Bell legislation so all children in high poverty schools have ready access to a healthy start to their day, and all schools have the resources they need to serve healthy meals to students.

## **4. Understand hunger – and its solutions - more accurately in Washington.**

USDA's annual food security report is incredibly useful but it falls short in helping us understand where and who hunger is hitting in our communities. Washington

should invest in a biennial food security survey that would collect and report disaggregated hunger data by race/ethnicity and geography, so advocates and policymakers have better information about hungry people in our communities, especially communities of color. Washington also should require all state agencies that manage federal nutrition programs to contribute to a single annual report that documents how well these programs are meeting national standards of participation, as well as summarize the actual and potential federal dollars that support our state and local communities with these nutrition programs.

**5. Increase economic stability by raising wages, ensure paid leave for all workers, and expand tax credits for working families to fix the root cause of hunger: poverty.**

Ballot initiative 1433 gives Washington voters the ability to guarantee a higher wage and better income security through paid leave. Initiative 1433 allows all workers to earn paid sick and safe leave and would phase in a minimum wage of \$13.50 over the next four years for more than 730,000 Washingtonians. Yet lawmakers also have the ability to raise minimum wages and require paid leave for all workers.

Click [here](http://bit.ly/2016USDAHungryinWA) for the full USDA report: <http://bit.ly/2016USDAHungryinWA>

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## Data Summary Table:

<b>U.S.</b>	<b>Food Insecurity</b>	<b>Very Low Food Security (hunger)</b>
<b>All Households</b>	<b>12.7%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>
<b>Households under 185% federal poverty level</b>	32.8%	13.6%
<b>Households with children:</b>		
All	16.6%	4.9%
With children under 6 yrs	16.9%	4.2%
Single woman-headed	30.3%	9.4%
Single man-headed	22.4%	8.2%
<b>Single person households:</b>		
Woman	14.7%	7.2%
Man	14.0%	7.3%
Elderly	9.2%	4.2%
<b>Households, by race/ethnicity:</b>		
White, non-Hispanic	10.0%	4.3%
Black, non-Hispanic	21.5%	7.9%
Hispanic	19.1%	6.4%
Other, non-Hispanic	10.3%	4.3%

### Notes:

None of these data are available at the state level.

There is no more specific race/ethnicity data than these categories and none available at the state level.