



MAP THE MEAL GAP 2011

Food Insecurity and Food Cost Estimates for 2009

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What is food security?

A household is food secure if there is access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. Each year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) measures the extent and severity of food insecurity in households through a nationally representative survey (the Current Population Survey). These statistics are released in a report called *Household Food Security in the United States* and are based on a measure of food security derived from responses to questions about conditions and behaviors known to characterize households having difficulty meeting basic food needs.

For more details, see: http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/stats_graphs.htm

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What is the food insecurity data?

Map the Meal Gap: Food Insecurity & Food Cost in the United States provides new information about food insecurity for each county and Congressional District in the U.S. The food insecurity estimates are based on a well-established, expert-reviewed regression model that combines the determinants of state food insecurity rates derived from the Current Population Survey with county level metrics of factors closely related to food insecurity (e.g., unemployment, median income, poverty, demographic measures) that are also available at the state level. The result is detailed information about food insecure persons in counties and Congressional Districts, and their income levels.

[The data provided to all food banks](#) provides estimates for food insecurity rates of persons at various income levels in each county in their service area. The income levels shown are based on SNAP and other Federal nutrition program thresholds specific to each state. This same information is provided [for states](#), as well, showing food insecurity for all counties and Congressional Districts in the state. Additionally, an [interactive map](#) has been created that displays food insecurity rates and food cost in each county, service area and state.

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Who is behind this research?

Originally inspired by the "missing meals" project pioneered by Food Lifeline, the Map the Meal Gap analysis was developed by [Dr. Craig Gundersen](#) for Feeding America. The food insecurity rates are based on a national-level model that allows us to determine the population in need of food at the county and Congressional District level. Additionally, Feeding America worked in collaboration with the Nielsen Company to arrive at estimates for food cost variation by county. In order to ensure accuracy and promote transparency, the results were reviewed by the Feeding America [Technical Advisory Group](#). The research was generously supported by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and The Nielsen Company.

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What does this data tell me? How do I use this?

Like the state level food insecurity data provided by the USDA, this information can be used to tell a number of stories and can be applied in many ways. Some potential uses might include:

- Further refine planning tools, such as gap analyses or agency development
- Spark conversations with potential community partners

- Demonstrate need for multiple strategies in the same county
- Provide another perspective on relative pounds or program outreach needed in counties

For members serving just one county (or perhaps one large, primary county), you are welcome to contact us to discuss the possibility of developing sub-county estimates of food insecurity. These estimates can be established if you have sub-county variables for poverty, unemployment, and other demographic data.

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What does this data not tell me? How should I not use this?

Food insecurity at any geographic level is a symptom of greater societal ills associated with poverty, unemployment, etc. Because rates of food insecurity or hunger can increase or decrease depending on outside factors, *a food bank or agency should not measure success as “reducing the food insecurity rate by x amount.”* Additionally, these rates should not be used:

- to compare relative effectiveness of county-distribution within or across food banks
- to compare performance in a county from one year to the next
- to evaluate the effectiveness of different programs

It should also be noted that the county level food insecurity rates are intended to provide another layer of information to the network. Study results should never be the only source of information used to direct food or other resources, rather, it can add to your arsenal of information when making those decisions.

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Why are the food budget shortfall and “meal gap” so huge?

Food insecurity has reached an all-time high. The USDA’s annual report on Household Food Security estimates that 50 million individuals in the United States were food insecure in 2009. Given the documented need in the U.S., it is not a surprise that food insecure individuals report a high food budget shortfall. When this dollar amount is translated into meals, it can seem overwhelming. Food insecurity is the result of a complex array of social challenges such as insufficient income, persistent poverty, structural inequities, etc. and it is important to remember that food banking is one part of a broader safety net.

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So you’re saying that it would cost \$21B to meet the food needs of the food insecure? Is this the cost to end hunger?

The amount of \$21B represents a national average of the food budget shortfall experienced by the food insecure population in 2009. It is not the cost to end hunger. Even providing cash assistance to every food insecure person in this amount would not mean that the underlying complex array of social challenges such as insufficient income, persistent poverty, structural inequities, etc. would be resolved. We know from *Hunger in America 2010* that people are facing budget pressures, and are often making trade-off between groceries and utilities, medical care, and other necessary resources. Additionally, the

\$21B figure does not take into account food banks' operational costs or the costs associated with locating and reaching out to food insecure people.

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Is this different from the Missing Meals research some food banks have conducted? How?

Yes. Though this project was inspired by the Missing Meals analyses by Food Lifeline and Second Harvest Heartland, the methodology employed is different and the final result will be different. A primary difference is that Map the Meal Gap defines the population in need as those who are food insecure rather than as those with incomes below 185% of the poverty line (or some other poverty threshold). The USDA's annual report, *Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2009* (Nord, 2010), estimates that 29% of food insecure people have incomes higher than 185% of poverty. Map the Meal Gap assumes that food insecurity is a more accurate metric for hunger than poverty.

Additionally, the food budget shortfall or "meal gap" is based entirely on the amount of money food insecure people say they would need to have adequate food. Unfortunately, we do not know whether or not this amount takes into account the impact/availability of meals currently being provided by food banks, Federal programs, and other nonprofit organizations.

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How does this relate to Hunger in America? Will this replace the hunger study?

Hunger in America (HIA) and Map the Meal Gap (MMG) examine two different populations (although they are not mutually exclusive).

- Hunger in America consists of two parts, the client report and the agency report. The populations on which HIA is focused include emergency food assistance clients, and emergency food assistance agencies. Additionally, HIA provides a measure of client service.
- Map the Meal Gap looks at a different population, those identified as food insecure. MMG provides a measure of need.

Most emergency food clients are food insecure, but many are not (25% according to *Hunger in America 2010*). Unfortunately, the USDA Food Security survey does not provide reliable information about emergency food use, so we do not know what percent of food insecure people use emergency food. For more on the USDA's definition of food insecurity, see <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/labels.htm>. In short, the studies provide two different types of critical information. Map the Meal Gap will not replace the quadrennial hunger study.

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I thought that the USDA only provided info at the state level. How did you get these numbers?

Our researchers used a regression model to estimate county-level food insecurity. We examine the relationship between food insecurity and variables closely related to food insecurity at the state level. These include unemployment, median income, poverty, and specific demographic measures. We then

look at these relationships at the county level while taking into account variations across states and across time. [The model](#) is standard and well established, and was vetted through our [Technical Advisory Group](#) of experts.

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Why are my state-level numbers slightly different from the state-level food insecurity information provided in “Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2009” (Nord, 2010)?

In part, this is due to the fact that the Household Food Insecurity report uses 3-year averages of the food insecurity measure. In part, it is due to the fact that the state totals in this study are the totals of the county-level data produced through the model. Adjusting for the 3-year vs. 1-year difference, the model is remarkably accurate – state food insecurity rates are within less than a percentage point of the USDA state rates.

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How does this relate to the poverty rate?

Food insecurity and poverty are measures of two different social problems. For more about the differences between poverty, food insecurity, and emergency food usage, please view our [supplemental resources section](#).

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Does this show only all food insecure people? Could we also see just people with very low food security?

The data currently posted to HungerNet shows all food insecure people (i.e., persons living in low food secure households or very low food secure households). County-level “very low food security” rates are not available at this time, primarily due to sample size issues. We will be looking into this further in the future.

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Can I compare this 2009 food insecurity rate to the 2008 Map the Meal Gap data you provided?

The original 2008 estimates were based on different data sources than those established in 2009. In 2008, the poverty rate, median income and demographic data were not yet available at the county level in the American Community Survey (ACS). Instead, we used Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) to arrive at the data used in the model. We will continue to use the ACS data going forward. In addition, the 2008 estimates were based on purchased unemployment figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for December 2008. In for the 2009 food insecurity estimates, we use 2009 annual average unemployment figures from BLS in an effort to ensure that the data are consistent and represent the entire year. As a result of these changes, the 2009 estimates are to be considered the first year of data availability.

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Can I update the number of food insecure people by applying the 2009 food insecurity rates to my area’s 2010 population?

No. The food insecurity rates are based on [data collected in 2009](#) and the model is based on population information from 2009. The rates do not apply to the 2010 population. The 2010 Map the Meal Gap data will be released in March of 2012.

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How frequently can/will these data be updated?

The data will be updated annually in March. The food insecurity estimates rely on the USDA Food Security data which is released in November/December each year.

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Can you provide more detail about the food insecurity model and methodology?

We proceed in two steps to estimate the extent of food insecurity in each county.

Step 1: Using state-level data from 2001-2009, we estimate a model where the food insecurity rate for individuals at the state level is determined by the following equation:

$$FI_{st} = \alpha + \beta_{UN}UN_{st} + \beta_{POV}POV_{st} + \beta_{MI}MI_{st} + \beta_{HISP}HISP_{st} + \beta_{BLACK}BLACK_{st} + \mu_t + u_s + \epsilon_{st} \quad (1)$$

where s is a state, t is year, UN is the unemployment rate, POV is the poverty rate, MI is median income, HISP is the percent Hispanic, BLACK is the percent African-American, μ_t is a year fixed effect, u_s is a state fixed effect, and ϵ_{st} is an error term. This model is estimated using weights defined as the state population. The set of questions used to identify whether someone is food insecure, i.e., living in a food insecure household, are defined at the household level.

Our choice of variables was first guided by the literature on the determinants of food insecurity insofar as we included variables that have been found to influence the probability of someone being food insecure. Next, we chose variables that are available both in the Current Population Survey and that are available at the county level, such as those in the American Community Survey or other sources (described below). Variables that are not available at both the state and county level cannot be used.

Of course, these variables do not portray everything that could potentially affect food insecurity rates. In response, we include the state and year fixed effects noted above which allow us to control for all other observed and unobserved influences on food insecurity.

Step 2: We use the coefficient estimates from Step 1 plus information on the same variables defined at the county level to generate estimated food insecurity rates for individuals defined at the county level.

This can be expressed in the following equation:

$$FI^*_{cs} = \hat{\alpha} + \hat{\beta}_{UN}UN_{cs} + \hat{\beta}_{POV}POV_{cs} + \hat{\beta}_{MI}MI_{cs} + \hat{\beta}_{HISP}HISP_{cs} + \hat{\beta}_{BLACK}BLACK_{cs} + \hat{\mu}_T + \hat{v}_s \quad (2)$$

where c denotes a county and T denotes the year from which the county level variables are defined. From our estimation of (2), we calculate both food insecurity rates and the number of food insecure persons in a county. The latter is defined as $FI^*_{cs} * N_{cs}$ where N is the number of persons. Congressional district food insecurity rates were estimated using the same methods.

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What year do the variables come from and why?

The information at the state level is derived from the Core Food Security Module (CFSM) in the December Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) for the years 2001-2009. The CPS is a nationally representative survey conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, providing employment, income and poverty statistics. Using information on all persons in the CPS from which we had information on (a) income and (b) food insecurity status, we aggregated information up to the state-level for each year.

For information at the county and congressional district level, we used five-year estimates for the years 2005-2009 from the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is a sample survey of 3 million addresses administered by the Census Bureau. In order to provide estimates for areas with small populations, this sample was accumulated over a 5-year period. Data was drawn from tables C17002 (ratio of income to poverty level), B19013 (median income), B2001 (percent African-American) and B3002 (percent Hispanic). Information about unemployment at the county level was taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' labor force data by county, representing 2009 annual averages. Information about unemployment in congressional districts was taken from data produced by Proximity and made available publicly on their website (http://proximityone.com/cd_employment.htm.) Their data are based on 2007-2009 American Community Survey estimates from the economic characteristics profile (items E001-E009).

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Which unemployment rate did you use in the model and why?

Information about unemployment at the county level was taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' labor force data by county, representing 2009 annual averages. Information about unemployment in congressional districts was taken from data produced by Proximity and made available publicly on their website (http://proximityone.com/cd_employment.htm.) Their data are based on 2007-2009 American Community Survey estimates from the economic characteristics profile (items E001-E009).

Note that this rate does not include discouraged workers, underemployed workers, etc. There is no consistent data on 'underemployment' and rates of unemployment that take into account discouraged workers are not available at the county level. Inclusion of the poverty rate, median income and state fixed effects in the model will likely compensate for the effect that underemployment would have on the food insecurity rate. If you have specific concerns about how, for example, the number of discouraged workers in your county might impact food insecurity rates, we would be happy to work with you to think more about what this means in your service area.

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How did you determine the county-level rates of persons above and below the SNAP threshold (and other nutrition program thresholds)?

American Community Survey (ACS) data was used to determine the food insecure population falling within each income bands. Specifically, we used five-year estimates for the years 2005-2009, in order to establish rates for areas with small populations. The ACS provides population data broken into the following income bands: 0-50% of the federal poverty level, 100-124%, 125-149%, 150-184%, 185-199%,

200% and over. In cases where the breakdowns do not directly correspond to the SNAP threshold cutoffs (e.g., percent below 165% of the poverty line), we take the relevant midpoint between two categories. As an example, for “percent below 165% of the poverty line”, we take the percent below 150% of the poverty line plus 3/7 of the percent between 150 and 185% of the poverty line.

The methods we use to arrive at the food insecurity estimates are similar to those [described above](#) for the entire population of a county. The primary difference is that we estimate food insecurity for those within a particular income band (e.g., for those below 130% of the poverty line) rather than for the entire population. Congressional Districts are estimated in a similar manner.

Using these estimations, we arrive at the food insecurity rate within a county for those below or above a particular income threshold. Using information on food insecurity rates for a particular income category and the number of people in a county below that income threshold, we can calculate an estimation of the proportion of food insecure persons in any county who fall above or below a particular threshold. Finally, based on our estimates of the proportion of the food insecure population with incomes below and above a threshold, we can estimate the proportion of the food insecure population between these thresholds. As an example, if the SNAP threshold is 130% of the poverty line, we can estimate the proportion of the food insecure population with incomes between 130 and 185% of the poverty line. (For states with SNAP thresholds at 185% of the poverty line or above, there are no “between estimates” to calculate.)

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What does food insecurity look like for those who are not eligible for federal nutrition programs (typically those above 185% of poverty)?

As we know from “Household Food Insecurity in the United States, 2009” (Nord et al., 2010), 29% of food insecure people have incomes higher than 185% FPL. While this may seem counterintuitive, one should note that 185% of the poverty rate is still only \$40,792 for a household of 4. In places with higher living costs, one can imagine that this income may be insufficient to ensure food security. Additionally, those living in these households may have experienced a recent job loss or other emergency and have become food insecure while in transition. These families’ ability to access our network’s emergency food services may relieve pressure on their expenses, allow them to get back on their feet, and help them to avoid falling deeper into poverty. For more information about the poverty rate, please read [Poverty Measure & Income Bands](#).

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Are high food costs and food insecurity related? Does this mean that high food costs cause food insecurity?

No. The information supplied does not intend to suggest correlation or causation. Some research suggests that medical costs and housing costs are more closely related to food insecurity, but the research is inconclusive.

Again, the food insecurity and food cost data are not presented together in an effort to suggest a causal relationship between them. Instead, they are intended to provide two separate, but related pieces of

information about the challenges of being food insecure, and together they provide the metrics needed to calculate the food budget shortfall.

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How did you develop the weekly food budget shortfall number?

We used a question taken from the [Core Food Security Module \(CFSM\)](#) which asks respondents the following question prior to asking the 18 questions used to derive the food insecurity measure:

In order to buy just enough food to meet (your needs/the needs of your household), would you need to spend more than you do now, or could you spend less?

Out of those responding “more”, the following question is posed:

About how much MORE would you need to spend each week to buy just enough food to meet the needs of your household?

Restricting the sample to households experiencing food insecurity over the previous 12 months, and including those who report zero dollars (i.e. those who could spend “the same” each week), we divide by the number of people in the household to arrive at a per-person figure of \$13.99 per week nationally.

This number is then adjusted at the county-level based on the [Nielsen cost-of-food index](#), which provides your localized view of the food budget shortfall.

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If the cost data are based on a survey, how do we know people are reporting accurate numbers?

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a nationally representative survey conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, providing employment, income and poverty statistics. In December of each year, 50,000 households respond to a series of questions on the Core Food Security Module (CFSM) in addition to questions about food spending and the use of government and community food assistance programs. Households are selected to be representative of civilian households at the state and national levels, and thus do not include information on individuals living in group quarters (e.g. nursing homes or assisted living facilities).

In order to assess whether these results “make sense,” we looked at various sub-groupings of the sample. When we break out the additional dollars needed by household size, income level, and food insecurity level, the results are consistent with what one would expect. Namely, larger households report needing more money to be food secure than smaller households; individuals with lower incomes report needing more money to be food secure than those with higher incomes; and individuals in households with very low food insecurity report needing more money to be food secure than households with low food insecurity. Analysis of these data over time indicates consistency with food pricing, showing a notable increase when food prices spiked in 2007.

Finally, the value of \$13.99 was selected both because it is a conservative result and because it is very similar to the difference in per-person weekly food expenditures between food secure and food

insecure households reported elsewhere (Seligman, H. & Schillinger, D. Hunger and socioeconomic disparities in chronic disease. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2010.).

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Does the dollar figure representing the food budget shortfall take into account transportation to the food store or any measure of food access?

No. The food cost data reflect the prices paid at the register by consumers. Other barriers to accessing food were not included. We do encourage you to discuss distance to a store, the local cost of gas, etc. as a critical layer of information/context you can provide as you are discussing this information with legislators, donors and other audiences.

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Is SNAP or Emergency Food counted in the weekly dollars the food insecure report needing?

Unfortunately, the Current Population Survey does not specify whether or not respondents should include their SNAP expenditures or food they receive from emergency food assistance when estimating the additional money they would need for adequate food. When asked about their weekly food expenditures (which follows the food insecurity questions and questions about additional money), they are asked to [include SNAP purchases](#). However, we do not know whether or not they are taking Federal food assistance or emergency food into account when they answer questions about what they would need to be food secure.

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How did you arrive at 60% for frequency of food insecurity?

As reported by the USDA, in the annual report [Household Food Security in the United States](#), “the average household that was food insecure at some time during the year experienced this condition in 7 months of the year” (Nord, M., Coleman-Jensen, A., Andrews, M. & Carlson, S. USDA ERS. 2010, p. 59.)

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How did you arrive at \$2.54 as the average cost of a meal?

To calculate an approximation of the number of meals needed to meet the needs of a food insecure person we proceed as follows. On the Current Population Survey there is a question that asks how much a household usually spends on food in a week:

Now think about how much (you/your household) USUALLY (spend/spends). How much (do you/does your household) USUALLY spend on food at all the different places we've been talking about IN A WEEK? (Please include any purchases made with SNAP or food stamp benefits).

Restricting the sample to households that are food secure, constructing this sample on a per-person basis, and dividing by 21 (i.e., assuming three meals per day), we arrive at a per-meal cost of \$2.54. We restricted the sample to food secure households to ensure that the per-meal cost was based on the experiences of those with the ability to purchase a food secure diet.

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How do you arrive at the county-level estimates of cost per meal and food budget shortfall?

The Nielsen Company collects data on the sales of UPC-coded food items across the country. To establish a relative price index that would allow for comparability the following steps were taken:

1. Nielsen assigned each UPC-coded food item to one of the 26 food categories in the USDA Thrifty Food Plan (TFP).
2. These were then weighted to the TFP market basket based on pounds purchased per week by age and gender. Specifically, pounds purchased by males age 19-50 were examined. Please note that while other age and gender weights may have resulted in different *total* market basket costs, *relative pricing* between counties (our goal for this analysis) would not have been affected.
3. The total market basket is then translated into a multiplier that can be applied to any dollar amount. This multiplier differs by county, revealing differences in food costs at the county level.

We then apply that multiplier to the national average for food budget shortfall (\$13.99) and the national cost per meal estimate (\$2.54) to arrive at localized estimates.

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How do you arrive at the “meal gap”?

The meal gap is a translation of the food budget shortfall. Using the methodology specified in “[How did you develop the weekly food budget shortfall number?](#)” we arrive at a national figure of \$21B that food insecure people report needing to buy adequate food. We then translate that the dollar figure into 8.4 million meals by dividing by [\\$2.54, the average cost per meal](#).

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Can you provide more detail about the food cost index methodology?

The Nielsen Company designed custom product characteristics so that UPC codes for all food items could be mapped to one of the 26 categories described in the USDA’s 2006 Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). This is based on 26 categories of food items (examples include “all potato products”, “fruit juices”, and “whole fruits.”) Each UPC-coded food item (non-food items, such as vitamins, were excluded) was assigned to one of the categories. Random-weight food items (such as loose produce or bulk grains) were not included; packaged fresh produce, such as bagged fruits and vegetables, were included. Prepared meals were categorized as a whole (rather than broken down by ingredients) and were coded to “frozen or refrigerated entrees.” Processed foods, such as granola bars, cookies, etc. were coded to “sugars, sweets, and candies” or “non-whole grain breads, cereal, rice, pasta, pies, pastries, snacks, and flours,” as appropriate.

The cost to purchase a market basket of these 26 categories was then calculated for each county. Sales of all items within each category were used to develop a cost-per-pound of food items in that category. Some categories, such as milk, are sold in a volume unit of measure and not in an ounces unit of measure. Volume unit of measures were converted to ounces by using “FareShare Conversion Tables” (fareshare.net/conversions=volume-to-weight.html.) Each category was priced based on the pounds purchased per week as defined by the USDA Thrifty Food Plan for each of 26 TFP categories by age and gender. We used the weights in pounds for purchases by Males 19-50 years for this analysis. Other age/gender weights may have resulted in different total market basket costs, but are unlikely to have impacted relative pricing between counties, which was the goal of the analysis.

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Are sales taxes included in the food cost index?

Yes. In an effort to most directly reflect the prices paid at the register by consumers, we elected to integrate food sales taxes into the market basket prices. County-level food taxes include all state taxes and all county taxes levied on grocery items. Within some counties, municipalities may levy additional grocery taxes. Because these taxes are not consistently applied across the county, however, they are not included. Taxes on vending machine food items or prepared foods were not included, as the market baskets do not incorporate those types of foods. For state-level market basket costs, the average of the county-level food taxes was used. Fifteen states levy grocery taxes. An additional four states do not levy state-level grocery taxes, but do permit counties to levy a grocery tax. Finally, an additional two states do not levy state or county-level grocery taxes, but do permit municipalities to levy grocery taxes.

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How do I compare the cost-per-meal to the cost-per-meal in other counties?

Nielsen estimates that the relative pricing index is accurate to \$.05. However, there are many cost variations that one should also consider, such as housing, health care, utility costs, etc. While food cost is one indicator of pricing, we recommend that you take additional factors into account when considering pricing across counties.

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Why is the number of food insecure in my area higher than the number of clients that we serve?

The Map the Meal Gap study examines a different population than food bank clients (although they are not mutually exclusive). Most emergency food clients are food insecure, but many are not (25% according to *Hunger in America 2010*). Unfortunately, the USDA Food Security survey does not provide reliable information about emergency food use, so we do not know what percent of food insecure people use emergency food. For more on the USDA's definition of food insecurity, see <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/labels.htm>.

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A county in my service area is shared with another member. How do I use the data within this particular county?

The data for all shared counties are provided in both applicable members' tailored spreadsheets. As this is a measure of need, not of service delivery or food bank clients, it is not necessary to "split" the numbers. If you find it useful to discuss the implications of a particular demographic breakout in that county with your partner-member, you are welcome and encouraged to do so.

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Can I use this data in my existing gap analysis projects?

The Map the Meal Gap data provides an additional level of information for your gap analysis. Because these analyses differ by food bank, we recommend contacting us directly.

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Can I use this data to set performance targets for my organization?

If you choose to use the data, the county level food insecurity rates and food budget shortfall can provide your food bank with a new way of considering need in your community. This information, in conjunction with your administrative data and other research, can provide fodder for strategic goals and plans for growth. You may consider setting meal distribution targets based on this information (i.e. distribute XX more meals per year, or provide XX more meals through [SNAP outreach](#) per year). However, as indicated [here](#), a change in food insecurity rates should not be used to measure program effectiveness over time or from one county to the next. For more information on strategic planning and setting targets, please visit the [Planning and Analysis](#) HungerNet page.

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If I choose to use this data, what should I consider and/or anticipate?

You may wish to consider the following:

- The meal gap is very large, and it is important to remember that food banking is one part of a broad safety net. Food insecurity is the result of a complex array of societal challenges such as insufficient income, persistent poverty, structural inequities, etc. While food banks play a critical role in getting food to people in need, it is not feasible for emergency food assistance to “close the gap” given the magnitude of the problem.
- Note that these results provide another layer to the information that you already use. It is not meant to replace the information that you collect.
- How do these numbers relate to the current numbers that you are using? Be prepared to discuss the similarities and differences.
- Think about how these measures fit in with your existing strategic plans, goals and objectives.
- Populations benefit differently from different programs, so consider this as a potential factor in your planning. The methods used in establishing the county-level measures do not take into account, for example:
 - Eligibility criteria for public benefits, aside from poverty (e.g. assets, immigration status)
 - Costs of moving physical vs. “virtual” food
 - Capacity of access points (agencies, benefit offices)
 - Transportation or other food access issues

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How does this relate to pounds per person in poverty (PIIP)?

The county level food insecurity and meal gap estimates are a measure of need. PIIP is a measure of distribution. Prior to this study, “poverty” has been our closest metric for evaluating need at the local level. If you wish, the food insecurity estimates can provide your food bank with a new way of considering need in your community. The county level food insecurity estimates do not look at food bank service or emergency food usage among clients. For more about the differences between poverty, food insecurity, and emergency food usage, please view our [supplemental resources section](#).

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Will this affect my PIIP compliance/“green county” score?

No. The results provided in the Map the Meal Gap study are intended to provide the network with another layer of information. They are not reflected in the network contract and have no effect on PIIP.

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What if I have already done a missing meals project – can I integrate this new information into my project? Should I?

Map the Meal Gap and Missing Meals use [very different methodologies](#) to determine unmet need. Additionally, the Missing Meals analyses that have been conducted by the network vary substantially. While we are happy to discuss the details of your project, we have not been able to justify the methodology on which Missing Meals is based and can provide more information on utilization of Map the Meal Gap. Please feel free to contact us with questions.

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How can we as a food bank ‘close the gap’?

The food budget shortfall and calculated meal gap are very large, and it is important to remember that food banking is one part of a broad safety net. Food insecurity is the result of a complex array of social challenges such as insufficient income, persistent poverty, structural inequities, etc. While food banks play a critical role in getting food to people in need, it is not feasible for emergency food assistance to “close the gap” given the magnitude of the problem. However, Map the Meal Gap provides a new layer of information about what need looks like in your service area. The large meal gap reflects unprecedented need, and can assist you in your strategy for reaching the food insecure population.

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