



Food Insecurity in Rural Indiana

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Introduction

Nearly one in six Hoosiers live in poverty, and the numbers are rising (Carriere and Waldorf, 2013). One of the harsh realities of poverty, and one of special concern to decision and policy makers, is food insecurity, or inadequate access to food.

Food insecurity is of special concern because it requires individuals and families to devote a large share of scarce resources—both money and time—to obtaining adequate nutrition, a basic need for survival. In contrast, when individuals or families are food *secure*, they can devote resources to other areas, such as healthcare or education—investments that have the potential to help lift them out of poverty.

How prevalent is food insecurity in Indiana—especially in rural areas? What can a community do to alleviate hunger and ensure that *all* residents are able to lead a healthy, active life?

This publication is a follow-up to a previous paper on poverty (Carriere and Waldorf, 2013) and focuses specifically on food insecurity in rural Indiana. We start with a definition of food insecurity, then examine data to compare rural Indiana with the U.S. and other rural/mixed and urban areas of the state. We then focus on what a local community can do to combat this problem.

Defining Food Insecurity

The Economic Research Service (ERS) defines food security as an individual's access at all times to enough food for a healthy, active life. In contrast, food *insecurity* is the lack of access to adequate food, due to limited money or resources. Approximately 14.5 percent of U.S. households were food insecure in 2012 (Coleman, Jensen, et al., 2013).

Food insecurity can be broken down into two categories, officially designated by the USDA as "*low food security*" and "*very low food security*." Households with *low food security* are those that report "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet [with] little or no indication of reduced food intake" (ERS, 2013). These households, which make up about 8.8 percent of all households in the U.S., or approximately 10.7 million households (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2013), are those whose diet does not necessarily suffer in terms of quantity, but rather in quality.

Households with *very low food security* are those that show "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" (ERS, 2013). These households are those whose diet suffers in terms of quantity, because they do not have the resources to buy enough food. About 5.7 percent of U.S. households, or 6.8 million households (Coleman-Jensen, et al., 2013), fall into this category.

Audience: Local and state leaders who work with rural communities.

Purpose: To find data about issues of concern in rural communities and to interpret these data in meaningful ways to aid in decision-making.

Method: U.S. Census data analyzed across the county groupings—rural, rural/mixed, urban.

Potential Topics: Demographic changes, business development, health, health care, local government, taxes, education, agriculture, natural resources, leadership development, etc.

Outcome: Better, more informed decisions by rural decision-makers.

Measuring Food Insecurity in Rural Indiana

“Map the Meal Gap,” a recent study completed by Feeding America, a nationwide network of food banks, uses Current Population Survey data to estimate that in 2011, 16.3 percent—just over 1 million people—of Indiana’s total population was food insecure. Of these, some 1 million individuals, approximately 41 percent, had household incomes below 130 percent of the poverty threshold, 14 percent had household incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty threshold, and 45 percent had household incomes above 185 percent of the poverty threshold.

The poverty thresholds are the amounts of annual income below which a person or family is officially classified by the U.S. Census Bureau as “poor.” These rates vary by size of family and age of family members. They do not vary geographically. The poverty thresholds are important because they determine eligibility for many food assistance programs. A household with an income below 130 percent of the poverty threshold is eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—previously known as the Food Stamp Program—and free school meals. Households with income levels between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty threshold are eligible for reduced price school meals and benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Households with income levels above 185 percent of the poverty threshold do not qualify for federal nutrition assistance programs.

In Indiana’s rural counties (See Ayres, Waldorf, and McKendree, 2012 for an explanation of the grouping of Indiana’s 92 counties into three categories: urban, rural/mixed, and rural.), the average estimated rate of food insecurity is about 13 percent (compared with 13.5 percent and 15.1 percent in the mixed/rural and urban counties, respectively). About a third of those who are food insecure have household incomes above 185 percent of the poverty threshold, and are not eligible for federal nutrition programs (Feeding America, 2011).

Many local organizations remain concerned about this last group of people, despite their being at or above 185 percent of the poverty threshold. It is this group of people that tends to “fall through the cracks,” so to speak—any aid they receive is due to charitable response (Feeding America, 2011). Individuals and families at the lower end of this income bracket may experience food insecurity for various reasons, but one major reason is recent unemployment. Because they are not eligible for federal assistance, any aid they receive typically comes from non-governmental sources, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, or other forms of community aid.

Since 2000, nationwide participation in the SNAP program, which essentially subsidizes the monthly cost of food for qualifying individuals or families, has steadily increased. In 2000, participation averaged four percent of the population in Indiana’s rural and mixed/rural counties (five percent in urban counties). By 2010, participation had increased to an average of about 12 percent in urban, mixed/rural, and rural counties alike (ERS, 2013).

Participation in WIC, which provides assistance to low-income, pregnant or postpartum (up to 6-12 months) women, infants,

and children under the age of five, followed an increasing trend through 2010, and then decreased in both 2011 and 2012 (Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). This trend was seen both nationwide and in Indiana. As of 2012, total participation in WIC for the state of Indiana was 164,281 persons, down about 2,000 participants since 2010. This decline in WIC participation is likely related to the decrease in birth rates among U.S. women in recent years.

Food Assistance at the Local Level

There are at least 12 food banks that serve Indiana—11 that are members of a nationwide network of food banks, Feeding America, and one more that is part of a regional network located in the Midwest. Collectively, these food banks serve all 92 counties in Indiana (Figure 1).

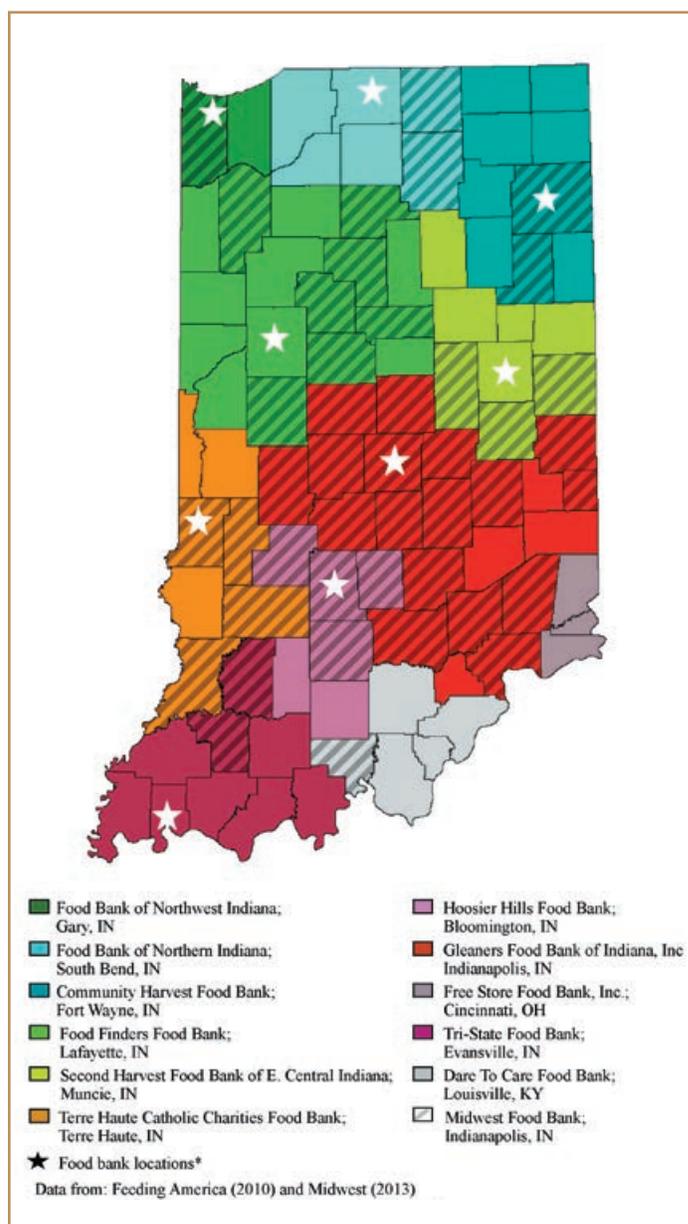


Figure 1. A Map of Indiana Food Bank Locations and Service Regions

While food banks work in conjunction with other agencies, such as food pantries (which allow participants to obtain food at free or discounted prices in distribution locations nearest to them), to collect and distribute food, food banks and their agencies have very different roles to fill. The food banks' primary role is gathering food and making it available to *agencies* within their region, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters. The agencies' primary role is distribution to *individuals or families* who need food aid, such as single-parent families, the elderly, recently unemployed individuals, victims of abuse, or the working poor.

In addition to pantry programs, food banks may offer programs aimed at diminishing food insecurity among children. One example of these programs is the Back Pack Program, which provides weekend meals to children who might not otherwise eat on non-school days. The programs offered vary between food banks and are limited by available funding, food supplies, and available staff volunteers.

In an interview with Food Finders Food Bank, Inc., interviewees commented that distribution poses a unique challenge in rural areas. Residents of rural areas typically have much further to travel to get to a food distribution location than residents of urban areas. Even more problematic is that the lack or cost of transportation may be most prohibitive for the families or individuals who most need aid.

Much of the legwork for these programs is done by local volunteers, and in rural locations, it is often more difficult for food banks to find partner agencies to assist with the distribution process. This is in part due to the fact that there are simply fewer people and fewer organizations in rural areas.

In addition, Food Finders employees also observed that many of the volunteers at the food banks' rural agencies partner are part of an aging population. As a result, many volunteers are "aging out," sometimes with no replacements. When this occurs, the partner agency disappears, and it becomes that much more difficult to make food aid accessible in the surrounding rural areas.

Implications for Rural Indiana

Both federal and local programs provide aid to individuals and families suffering from food insecurity. Despite these programs, however, food insecurity continues to be a widespread problem, nationwide as well as here in Indiana.

Food insecurity appears to be less prevalent in Indiana's rural communities than in their urban counterparts. Those facing food insecurity in rural counties, however, are often confronted with the added difficulty of decreased access to the programs designed to aid them.

Examples of questions decision-makers may want to consider when developing a plan to address food insecurity within their community include: 1) Has the need for food aid increased or decreased in our community in recent years, and what do we expect in the future? 2) How many people in our community are requiring aid on a daily/weekly/monthly basis? 3) What is the quality of the food aid available? 4) Who is seeking food aid in our community—are the same people repeatedly returning (long-term

demand), or is there a large turnover in those who need aid (short-term demand)? 5) How can we make aid available to those who might otherwise have limited access?

As rural community leaders work to address these issues, it may be useful to consider utilizing resources such as "Map the Meal Gap" (available at <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>) to more closely examine food insecurity within their own counties. "Map the Meal Gap" provides an interactive map that enables those interested to look at information on food insecurity within their own county. As communities and leaders use this information in conjunction with their own knowledge of their community, it will enable them to address the issue of food insecurity in a way that is best for their community. Whether by helping people understand the role of federal aid programs, contributing volunteer hours towards food distribution, or simply by instilling a greater desire and motivation to "take care of our own" within the community, communities and leaders can have an impact on food insecurity, one individual or family at a time.

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The authors would like to thank Kier Crites and Kim Motuliak of Food Finders Food Bank, Inc., for valuable information and input provided in an interview with the authors, as well as Katy Bunder, also of Food Finders, for her input on this project. The authors thank Maria Marshall, Brigitte Waldorf, and Heather Eicher-Miller for their review and helpful comments.

Nov. 2013

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