



The State of the Working Hungry: Low Wages Chief Cause of Malnutrition

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Key Findings:

America is facing an epidemic of the “working hungry.” Hunger Free America’s analysis of federal data has determined:

- Approximately 16 million American adults lived in food insecure households with at least one person employed in the years 2013 to 2015. In other words, 16 million U.S. residents worked but still struggled against hunger.
- 6.12 percent of all Americans – more than one in twenty – worked but were unable to afford sufficient food.
- About half of all working-age individuals living in U.S. food insecure households were employed.
- Approximately 35% of all Americans living in food insecure households were employed.
- The states with the highest raw number of working hungry adults were California (1.779 million), Texas (1.485 million), New York (864,000), and Florida (857,000).
- The states with the highest percentage of working hungry people out of their food insecure populations were: Alaska (71 percent), North Dakota (66 percent); Utah (64 percent); and Idaho (63 percent).
- States with minimum wages at \$9/hour or greater had less per capita working people’s hunger than states with minimum wage at or below \$7.25, the level of the current federal minimum wage. In states at \$9 or above, 6.48 percent of the population was working hungry, compared at 7.01 percent in the states at \$7.25 or below.

State	Total Number of State Residents Living In Food Insecure Households with One Working Adult	State	Total Number of State Residents Living In Food Insecure Households with One Working Adult
California	1,779,971	Minnesota	205,258
Texas	1,485,425	South Carolina	203,417
New York	864,053	Massachusetts	176,563
Florida	857,064	Kansas	173,303
Ohio	609,076	Mississippi	171,996
North Carolina	519,302	Arkansas	163,320
Georgia	503,211	Connecticut	149,594
Michigan	483,709	Utah	145,020
Illinois	481,507	Nevada	143,984
Pennsylvania	473,787	Iowa	125,020
New Jersey	353,310	Nebraska	101,529
Arizona	347,558	New Mexico	95,983
Washington	317,883	Idaho	86,849
Missouri	317,131	West Virginia	77,167
Virginia	313,269	Maine	68,670
Indiana	304,999	Hawaii	58,584
Tennessee	301,413	New Hampshire	48,089
Maryland	261,755	Montana	45,276
Alabama	252,798	Rhode Island	40,751
Louisiana	247,345	South Dakota	37,654
Wisconsin	244,006	Delaware	35,301
Oregon	234,119	Wyoming	30,090
Colorado	230,944	Alaska	29,377
Kentucky	217,669	North Dakota	25,641
Oklahoma	207,377		

State	Percent of State Residents that Live In Food Insecure Households with One Working Adult	State	Percent of State Residents that Live In Food Insecure Households with One Working Adult
Alaska	71.33%	Ohio	49.90%
North Dakota	65.91%	Arizona	49.53%
Utah	64.20%	Michigan	49.41%
Idaho	62.58%	North Carolina	49.12%
Kansas	61.36%	Delaware	48.84%
Nebraska	60.70%	New Mexico	48.73%
Minnesota	59.41%	Maine	48.10%
Colorado	59.25%	Indiana	47.93%
Wyoming	59.22%	Pennsylvania	47.72%
South Dakota	59.20%	Florida	47.63%
Iowa	58.37%	New York	45.88%
Maryland	57.74%	Alabama	45.62%
Hawaii	56.32%	Louisiana	44.85%
Virginia	55.68%	South Carolina	44.42%
New Hampshire	55.40%	Massachusetts	44.06%
Wisconsin	54.23%	Arkansas	43.87%
Texas	53.63%	Tennessee	42.72%
Missouri	53.33%	Kentucky	42.37%
New Jersey	52.08%	Mississippi	41.19%
Oklahoma	51.77%	West Virginia	39.71%
Montana	51.46%	Alabama	45.62%
Illinois	51.25%	Louisiana	44.85%
California	51.09%	South Carolina	44.42%
Nevada	50.93%	Massachusetts	44.06%
Oregon	50.42%	Arkansas	43.87%
Washington	50.30%	Tennessee	42.72%
Vermont	50.29%	Kentucky	42.37%
Connecticut	50.18%	Mississippi	41.19%
Georgia	50.13%	West Virginia	39.71%
Rhode Island	49.95%		

Background

There was once a time in U.S. history when there was real potential for all working Americans to make a decent, secure living, be economically self-sufficient, and truly support a family's growth into better opportunities than previous generations may have been afforded. Today, that is sadly no longer the case and the potential to restore an equilibrium amongst this country's socioeconomic composition dwindles. While there are several contributing factors, from steep increases in higher education costs, to an extreme and growing concrete of wealth shared amongst the most elite, one of the greatest is that of wages. This is especially true of the federally set minimum wage, as it has not kept up with steadily increasing standard living costs.

In fact, the Living Wage Calculator, developed by a research team at MIT, showed that on average, a good living wage for a family of four in the United States should approximately be \$27,518 per annum (\$15.12); a number that pales in comparison to the yearly salary afforded at the current federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hr. Furthermore, an annual analysis done by the National Low Income Housing Coalition showed that renters would have to earn a full-time wage of \$20.30/hr on average to afford a standard 2 bedroom apartment in America, with six-states including the District of Columbia, with the need for a rate about \$25/hour. These needs are simply not being met, with the current highest set minimum wage being \$11.50/hour in Washington D.C.

While contingent upon a state's particular eligibility criteria atop the federal guidelines, a single person's income that is presently working at the federal minimum wage (earning a monthly salary of a little over \$1,100) is ever so slightly below the federally mandated income eligibility criteria for SNAP benefits, currently set at \$1287/month. Despite being under the income threshold for SNAP eligibility, the small benefit allotment a full-time minimum wage worker may be entitled simply cannot make up the gap in the necessary resources. This phenomena presents a unique set of challenges and exemplifies the unstable and transient nature of low-wage jobs. Due to the nature of these positions generally being hourly and at-will (meaning an employee can be terminated at any time, without advance noticed or stated reason), workers schedules can rapidly fluctuate, with rather varying hours that may dip below 35 hours/week and they may or may not be in between jobs at certain points of their careers. These and other circumstances may cause an individual to periodically dip in and out of the eligibility range for public benefits (such as SNAP). Surviving solely off meager resources is a constant struggle for those at the brink of just barely being ineligible for benefits, which is why individuals in this circumstance may often choose to work double, and have more than one job at a time.

This real struggle, that poor and food-insecure Americans are stretching limited resources extremely thin, forthrightly disputes the general stereotypes of being lazy and rigging the/relying on the "system" associated with these qualities.

After the 2016 general election, Hunger Free America analyzed caseload data for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called the Food Stamps Program. Disproving the stereotype that SNAP recipients are all in 'inner cities' or blue states, we found that, out of the top ten most SNAP-utilizing states, eight voted for Trump in the general

election. This proves that that large numbers of Americans who rely upon federal nutrition assistance live in rural, mostly-white, areas. With 44 million Americans –living in suburban, rural, and urban areas of every state – relying on SNAP, the ‘they’ is really ‘us.’ That SNAP data, combined with the working hungry data, indicate clearly the main cause of U.S. hunger is not laziness, but structural inequalities in the US and state economies.

Methodology

Data for this report is from an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau as a supplement to the monthly Current Population Survey. The USDA sponsors the annual survey and the USDA’s Economic Research Service compiles and analyzes the responses. The 2015 food security survey covered 93,948 households nationwide, comprising a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 125 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals because of too little money for food, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food insecure conditions reported.

According to the USDA, the number of food insecure conditions and behaviors that the household reports determines the food insecurity status of each interviewed household. Households are classified as being food secure if they report no food insecure conditions or if they report only one or two food insecure conditions. USDA defines “food insecure” as the condition under which: “At least some time during the year, the food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food.”