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Food Insecurity Reaches Record High: New Study Highlights Urgent Need for Action

NORFOLK, VA | May 28, 2024 – The extra amount of money that people facing hunger said they need to have enough food reached its highest point in the last 20 years, according to Feeding America’s annual Map the Meal Gap study. Map the Meal Gap is the only study that provides local-level estimates of food insecurity and food costs for every county and congressional district in the U.S. The study builds upon the USDA's latest report of national and state data, which showed a sharp increase in food insecurity in 2022 amidst historically high food prices and the expiration of many pandemic-era programs. Map the Meal Gap emphasizes the urgent call for all of us to take action.

The latest report has revealed several critical insights into the state of food insecurity within the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore’s service area. Key findings indicate a significant increase in food insecurity, with the number of affected neighbors rising from 98,580 to 132,240, representing 10.5% of the population.

Food Insecurity by Geography
- Food insecurity is a pervasive issue impacting every county, parish, and congressional district in the United States.
- In our service area, which spans 4,745 square miles of both urban and rural land, the overall rate of food insecurity is 1 in 10 people.
- Among children, the situation is even more dire, with 1 in 6 children experiencing food insecurity, an increase from 35,060 to 49,880.
- Food insecurity rates within the service area vary, ranging from 8.6% in Chesapeake and Suffolk to 14.3% in Northampton County.
- Notably, child food insecurity is highest in rural Sussex County, where 27.8% of children (more than 1 in 4) are affected.

Income, Food Spending, and Costs
- A significant proportion of individuals facing hunger may not qualify for SNAP benefits, with estimates suggesting that more than 37% of those in need fall outside eligibility criteria.
- The national food budget shortfall has reached a record high of $33.1 billion, marking a nearly 43% increase from the previous year. This translates to an average shortfall of $24.98 per week per person in the Foodbank's service area.
- The average cost per meal in our service area is estimated at $4.03, which is above the national average of $3.99 per meal, highlighting the growing demand for food pantry services. High food prices can strain a household's budget when balancing expenses like housing, utilities, transportation, and other essentials.

Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity
- While nearly 40% of the food insecure population in the U.S. is white, food insecurity rates among Black individuals and Latino individuals exceed those of white individuals in most counties. These
disparities are an example of how historical, social, economic, and environmental factors have held many communities of color back, creating barriers to food security.

- Specifically, food insecurity affects 1 in 4 Black individuals and 1 in 5 Hispanic individuals in our region.
- Racial disparities persist, with significant variations in food insecurity rates across different racial and ethnic groups and geographic locations.

“The insights from this year's study confirm what we hear from people facing hunger: elevated food prices and the hard choice between other household expenses like electricity, childcare or medical bills is making hunger in America worse,” said Linda Nageotte, Feeding America President and Chief Operating Officer. “This powerful tool helps us understand the impact of food insecurity and underlines that we can choose to end hunger in America by coming together as a nation. That’s why Feeding America is calling upon Congress to strengthen critical federal nutrition programs that help to feed millions of families, children, and individuals.”

Additional key takeaways from the report can be found on the Map the Meal Gap website along with an interactive map that details food insecurity by geography, income, race and ethnicity.

**About the Foodbank**

Since 1981, the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore has proudly provided more than 380 million meals to our neighbors in need. We play a vital role in the fight against hunger by collecting, storing, and distributing food to our neighbors, while also working to address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity. This past year, we – alongside our neighbors – endured the impact of rising inflation, expiration of critical pandemic-era programs, and increased fuel and shipping costs. These hardships intensified the demand for our services and for the first time, we distributed more than 21 million pounds of food. With the support of our dedicated volunteers, generous donors, and compassionate community members, we strive to exceed this ever-growing baseline goal each year, ensuring that no one in our community goes to bed hungry. For up-to-date information, visit foodbankonline.org or follow us on social media (@foodbankseva).