



More than 1 in 10 Washington families have empty plates

# Hungry in Washington

October 2018

*Each fall, USDA releases a report on food insecurity and hunger (“very low food security”) across America and in each state. The report released in 2018 is based on household data collected in 2017.*

## Washington is making progress – but not enough, especially for our poorest and hungriest neighbors.

In 2017, 38.1 million Americans (15 million households) – including nearly **312,000 (10.8%) households in Washington** - were food insecure, according to [USDA’s new report](#). Of those, **118,400 Washington households (4.5%) experienced hunger** ("very low food security). These measures mean that a household didn’t know if they had enough money to make their food last through the month, or that they ran out of food and didn’t have enough money to buy more. Despite our state’s booming economy, food insecurity and hunger rates remain above pre-recession levels.

Despite the small but steady improvement in Washington’s food insecurity since the depths of the recession, economic recovery hasn’t reached the hungriest in our communities. Our state’s food insecurity rate was slightly better than the national rate – but not Washington’s hunger rate. The most vulnerable, poorest people in our state are lagging further and further behind.

WA State	Food Insecurity	Very Low Food Security (hunger)
2008	10.1	3.5
2009	11.1	4.3
2010	14	5.2
2011	14.7	6.1
2012	15.4	6.2
2013	14.6	6.1
2014	14.3	5.6
2015	13.7	5.5
2016	12.9	4.8
<b>2017</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>4.1</b>

% of households

Almost 58% of food insecure households reported participating in one or more of the three largest federal nutrition programs in the previous month: SNAP, WIC, National School Lunch. While these programs are

consistently proven to lift millions of people out of poverty and prevent food insecurity, for more than half of households who are food insecure, the combined effect of poverty and inadequate benefit levels means these critical programs aren't sufficient to end food insecurity and hunger, especially for households with children.

**U.S. Food Insecurity:** In 2017, 11.8% of Americans were food insecure – **over 38 million Americans lived in households that struggled to buy groceries.** Nearly 6.5 million children live in households where they don't have enough food to eat.

Compared to the national average (**11.8%**), rates of food insecurity were substantially higher for:

- Households with children (**11.6%**) that are:
  - headed by single women (**21.3%**)
  - households with very young children – under age 6 (**12.4%**)
- African American households (**13.3%**)
- Hispanic households (**12.5%**)

Hispanic and African American households experience food insecurity at 2 or 2.5 times the rate of White households (**5.2%**). Also, USDA's race/ethnicity data does not adequately reflect Washington's residents: by neglecting to report on Native American, Asian American or multiracial households, we can't begin to understand how hunger may be affecting tens of thousands of Washington households.

**Washington Food Insecurity:** In our state, the food insecurity rate is still higher than before the recession, though it continues to drop from the previous year: **311,900 (10.8%) households** were food insecure, compared to **11.6%** the prior year. Only ten states have a higher food insecurity rate than Washington.

Unfortunately, the available data on food insecurity and hunger make the problem invisible for a significant portion of Washington's population: there are no data available at all for Native American, Asian American, or multi-racial households, though the existing data indicate some of these communities may be disproportionately food insecure.

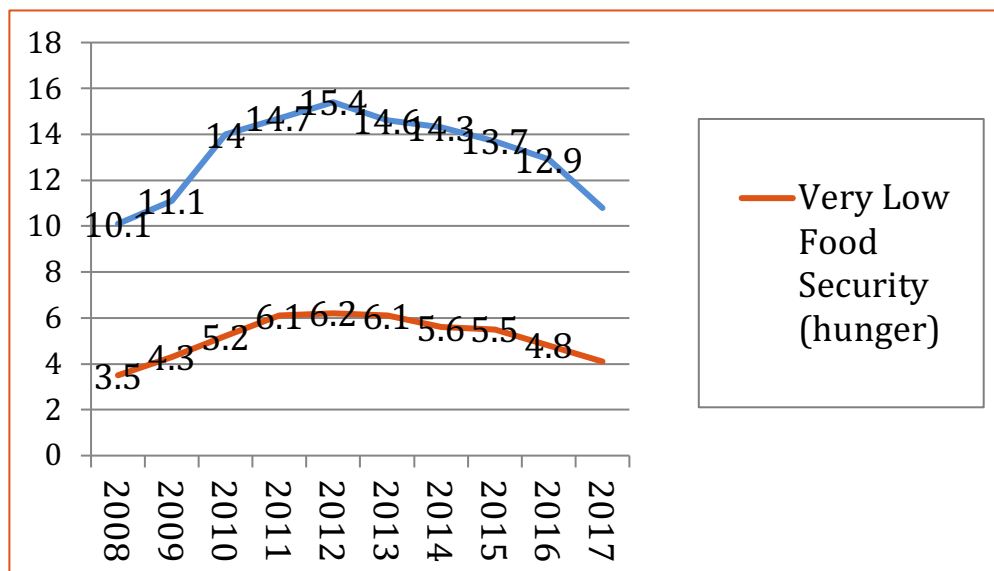
**U.S. Hunger:** Food insecurity in the very severe range is called "very low food security" (or, hunger). This condition includes skipping meals,

compromised nutrition, and disrupted eating patterns throughout the year. In 2017, **5.75 million (4.5%) American households experienced this severe food insecurity (hunger)**. This is only the second year since 2008 that there has been a modest but real drop in hunger, showing that our growing economy has provided little benefit for the hungriest Americans for nearly a decade.

**Washington Hunger:** In our state, **118,400 (4.1%)** of all Washington households experienced hunger, a figure that remains stubbornly and substantially higher than pre-recession rates (**3.5% in 2007**).

Even more alarming, while only 10 states have lower food insecurity rates than ours, 14 other states have lower rates of hunger: compared to other states, Washington's very poor are falling further behind – and going hungrier.

### 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. Homelessness is widespread across our state; these missing data make it difficult to target policy and programs for this especially vulnerable population.

Finally, 2018 has seen unprecedented federal policy change proposals related to hunger and SNAP, raising the specter of increasing hunger and poverty if these policies become law. From the first-ever partisan House Farm Bill, with its draconian changes to SNAP eligibility, to President Trump's proposed changes to immigration related to SNAP participation - access to our nation's most effective defense against hunger is facing daunting threats to its mission and its effectiveness.

## **Anti-Hunger Policy Recommendations:**

We know what works to beat hunger: investing in SNAP, WIC, healthy school meals, and Summer Meals - along with programs that improve health and make employment a path out of poverty, like Medicaid, housing, job training, and supports for working families, like child care and progressive tax policies.

### **1. 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. Congress should use Washington as a model to for policies that strengthen SNAP for all: Washington's program is timely and efficient; supports healthy eating and local farmers; uses targeted waivers for time limits; expands access to nationally-recognized voluntary education and job training. Our SNAP program demonstrates that when states maximize existing policy options and invest thoughtfully in it, SNAP works.

Yet the House passed a draconian, partisan Farm Bill that would undo much of Washington's SNAP progress - and any state that would follow our lead. By contrast, the widely bipartisan Senate Farm Bill made no substantive changes to SNAP eligibility and invests in job training programs modeled on Washington's.

**Congress must pass a Farm Bill that refuses to limit SNAP by changing its structure or funding: no cuts, no new eligibility restrictions.**

In the Farm Bill, Congress should eliminate the ABAWD restriction; restore eligibility for all legally residing immigrants; expand eligibility for low-income college students; increase the minimum benefit from \$15/month; and, use the Low Cost Food Plan to calculate SNAP benefit levels for all. In Washington, lawmakers should extend SNAP benefits by funding the Fresh Bucks program that provides additional purchasing power of SNAP clients for fruits and vegetables.

Proposed new federal DHS rules would tie immigration and citizenship options to use of public benefits by immigrants, including SNAP (and Medicaid, Section 8 housing, Medicare Part D). This rule would create lasting hunger, health and housing problems for thousands of immigrant families in our state and across the

country. Already this proposal has had a chilling effect on immigrants participating in these critical public health and economic stability programs that benefit households – and our communities. The federal government should withdraw this proposed rule, and residents should submit comments opposing it.

**2. Ensure no student goes hungry because they can't access federal child nutrition programs - especially school meals.**

Children have to work harder just to focus in school when they're hungry. Washington should take better advantage of positive opportunities like Community Eligibility, which allows schools to offer free nutritious meals for all students and eliminates instances when schools aren't paid by families for their child's meal. Eliminating the co-pay for reduced-price school lunch also expands access to nutrition for kids. Investing in Farm to School programs also improves meal quality while connecting local farmers and schools across the state.

Congress must stay the course with what's working for the healthy development of babies, children, and youth. Congress should protect and strengthen these programs, not roll back progress made in 2010's *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act*.

**3. Tax policies must provide economic opportunity for low- and moderate- income people, and must not deepen poverty or hunger by triggering cuts or structural changes to safety net programs.**

Washington still has the most regressive tax code of all 50 states, causing low-income and middle-class families to pay more of their income in taxes than the wealthiest Washingtonians do. Congress and Washington should do more to expand tax credits for low-income people and families with children, close state tax loopholes, and reverse the most damaging elements of the 2017 federal tax law that has led to record deficits once again.

**4. Fix the root cause of hunger by ending poverty: increase economic stability by expanding access to affordable housing, health care, and jobs for low income to people.**

Poverty is the root cause of hunger – Washington's solutions to poverty should be intergenerational, equitable, and provide a steady path out of hunger to financial stability. Washington can ensure people's basic needs are met by: improving access to affordable housing; ensuring fair housing rights; removing obstacles to programs like TANF or HENS; and removing barriers to education and jobs.

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