

# FOOD INSECURITY

## PUBLIC HEALTH BRIEF

Ronya Nassar, Health Policy Analyst



### OVERVIEW OF FOOD INSECURITY <sup>1</sup>

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. When a population lacks consistent access to food, negative health outcomes can occur, such as increased obesity rates, a decline in childhood development, premature death, and more. The causes of food insecurity can be complex, however, researchers have been able to understand some issues related to the source which include:

- Poverty, unemployment, or low income
- Lack of affordable housing
- Chronic health conditions or lack of access to healthcare
- Systemic racism and racial discrimination

It is important to note that even though these issues are closely related to food insecurity, people living outside of these issues can also experience food insecurity, for example, those living above the poverty line.

### SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH <sup>1,2</sup>

Social determinants of health (SDOH) are conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health and quality-of-life-risks and outcomes. The five key areas of SDOH are:

1. Healthcare Access and Quality
2. Education Access and Quality
3. Social and Community Context
4. Economic Stability
5. Neighborhood and Built Environment

It is important to note that food insecurity generally does not exist alone, but rather with many other intersecting issues that belong to the SDOH. These issues include lack of affordable housing, social isolation, economic/social disadvantage resulting from structural racism, chronic or acute health problems, high medical costs, and low wages. If groups come together to address food insecurity, they must address the overlapping challenges of SDOH to create an effective response.

**Sources:**  
 1. Feeding America <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>  
 2. CDC Social Determinants of Health <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/index.htm>  
 3. Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings and Roadmaps <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org>  
 4. USDA Food Access Research Atlas <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/>  
 5. USDA Ranges of Food Security and Food Insecurity <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/#ranges>

### DATA <sup>3</sup>

Percentage of population who lack adequate access to food, 2018

Harford County	9%
Maryland	11%
Top U.S. Performers	9%

Percentage of population who are low-income and do not live close to a grocery store, 2015

Harford County	4%
Maryland	3%
Top U.S. Performers	2%

### SPOTLIGHT: RANGES OF FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD INSECURITY <sup>4</sup>

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) introduced new language to describe ranges of severity of food insecurity from the recommendations of the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies.

- High Food Security: Households had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food.
- Marginal Food Security: Households had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food were not substantially reduced.
- Low Food Security: Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of the food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- Very Low Food Security: At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food.

### USDA FOOD ACCESS RESEARCH ATLAS <sup>5</sup>

The Food Access Research Atlas (FARA), produced by the USDA, provides a glimpse into a neighborhood or community's access to food stores that offer a variety of healthy and affordable food.

In Harford County, low income and low access areas are concentrated in the southern part of the county, low vehicle access is more concentrated in the northern part, and the western region contains at least 500 people or 33% of the population living farther than 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket.

