

US: Food insecurity may be twice as common as previously estimated

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Lack of sufficient access to nutritious food is a much greater problem for the American working class than previously understood, according to research published in the *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*. In a survey of 663 households in Columbus, Ohio, researchers found that 32 percent were food insecure. This rate of food insecurity is double that of previous estimates based on county-level census data.

The researchers considered about half of food-insecure households to be “very low food secure.” People in this group are “skipping meals, at risk for experiencing hunger, and probably missing work and school and suffering health problems as a result,” according to Michelle Kaiser, PhD, an assistant professor of social work at Ohio State, and lead author of the study. Although the current research only examined Columbus, other metropolitan areas likely have similar disparities, she added.

“This study exposed the vastly different experiences of people who all live in the same city,” said Dr. Kaiser. “My suspicion is that most people don’t recognize that there are such discrepancies and can’t imagine living where they couldn’t easily go to a grocery store.” Notwithstanding the obliviousness of the more comfortable layers of the population, these data provide further evidence that the country’s deepening social divisions are reaching critical proportions.

For their study, Dr. Kaiser and colleagues surveyed economically and racially diverse households to understand consumer decision-making and food access. They also audited 90 food stores for the availability of items on the US Department of Agriculture’s Thrifty Food Plan and MyPlate list. The Thrifty Food Plan lists low-cost foods intended to ensure adequate nutrition. This plan is the basis for the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP), which also is known as food stamps. MyPlate offers nutritional advice, such as emphasizing the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and healthy proteins.

Although African-Americans were overrepresented among the food insecure, the totality of the data indicated that the divide between food security and food insecurity was fundamentally one of class, not of race. Annual income tended to be less than \$25,000 among food-insecure individuals and more than \$50,000 among the food-secure. Full-time employment was significantly less common in food-insecure households (54.7 percent) than in food-secure households (75.2 percent). More than 20 percent of food-insecure households depended on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), veterans’ benefits, or other disability benefits, compared with 8.5 percent of food-secure households. About 5 percent of food-insecure households received unemployment benefits, compared with 3 percent of food-secure households. The food insecure were approximately five times more likely to participate in SNAP and nearly four times more likely to participate in the Women, Infants and Children assistance program than the food secure.

As a part of its turbocharged assault on the working class, the Trump administration proposes to cut \$193 billion from SNAP over the next 10 years. This proposal goes even further than the \$8.7 billion cut to SNAP that President Obama signed into law in 2014. If Trump’s proposal is enacted, it would deprive millions of poor and working-class Americans of assistance, forcing many to skip meals.

In Dr. Kaiser’s study, differences in education coincided with these differences in income. The highest level of education in food-insecure households was more likely to be a high school diploma, GED, two-

year degree, or technical degree. But a higher percentage of people with a bachelor's degree or graduate degree were food secure.

Previous investigations have linked food insecurity with higher risks of depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Dr. Kaiser and colleagues found that obesity, high blood pressure, and prediabetes were significantly more common among the food insecure than the food secure.

The investigators' audits indicated that supermarkets were more likely than specialty markets, partial markets or convenience stores to offer all of the Thrifty Food Plan items and all of the MyPlate recommendations. Yet, compared with food-secure participants, food-insecure respondents were significantly more likely to shop at partial markets and convenience or corner stores, which had poorer selections. One reason is that the food insecure lived closer to partial markets and convenience stores, while the food secure lived closer to supermarkets and specialty stores.

More than 27 percent of food-insecure households had difficulties finding fresh produce, and 26 percent were "not at all satisfied" with neighborhood food access. "The types of food stores most accessible to food-insecure households rarely stock healthy food items," said Dr. Kaiser. "In contrast, food-secure households are less likely to have to confront the same environmental challenges as food-insecure households to purchase and consume healthy foods."

Barriers to obtaining food (e.g., access, safety or crime, and affordability) were more common for food-insecure households than for the food secure. Food-insecure participants also had difficulties with transportation. They were less likely to use their own cars and more likely to get rides from acquaintances, ride public transportation, or walk to get food, compared with the food secure.

More and more grocery stores and supermarkets in low-income areas are closing, according to Dr. Kaiser. Companies rarely establish a new grocery store in an urban area, particularly if it would be near a neighborhood with a high rate of poverty. These decisions are based purely on the profit motive. As they chase middle-class and wealthy shoppers, the big supermarket chains shutter stores in poor and working-class areas. Consequently, as Dr. Kaiser's study indicates, poor and working-class people are left with

fewer options, which leaves them in worse health than their wealthier peers.

Like companies in any other industry, supermarkets extract their profits from the labor of their employees. As shareholders demand greater returns, the supermarket chains abandon less profitable locations and wrest concessions from their workers. The result is a worsening of inequality and continuing assaults on the health and well-being of the working class.



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