

# **Understanding Modern Food Insecurity in the United States Through a Historical and Political Analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite advancements in quality of life and technology throughout the world, food insecurity has remained a challenge, consistently plaguing all nations. In the United States, modern food insecurity began during the Great Depression as the government introduced the first federal food program to moderate national economic hardship. Federal intervention in food insecurity soon became a hot topic for the next century as lawmakers debated federal policy shaping the landscape of food insecurity. This paper examines food insecurity through the dimensions that shape its current landscape: national and statewide politics, geography, and social inequality. Through this examination, this paper demonstrates that food insecurity presents a deep issue that can be categorized by a series of structural challenges, such as political polarization, geographic inequalities, and persistent racial and social disparities. This paper concludes by offering a solution to the modern problem of food insecurity by focusing on long-term solutions instead of following the contemporary model.

## **DEFINITIONS (USDA, 2025)**

**Food Insecurity:** “The limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways”

**Food Desert:** “Low-income census tracts with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods”

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the United States, millions of Americans' lives are shaped by the availability and access to food. Although people may attempt to assist people in poverty, they rarely consider the broader scope. Food insecurity first became a forefront issue in the American political landscape during the Great Depression, as millions of Americans struggled to sustain themselves. During this time period, millions of crops were destroyed as a result of the Dust Bowl, forcing citizens to rely on canned products to sustain themselves. When fresh crops were produced, American citizens were so poor that they could not afford to purchase them (“Food 1929-1941”). On the other hand, American employment was at an all time low with 12,830,000 people unemployed during this time period (FDR Library). A combination of these factors led to 60 million people being affected by food insecurity, just under half the population. (SUNY) These facts led to the United States government's first intervention into American food insecurity. President Roosevelt implemented a national government program in which the US government spent over 75 million dollars to purchase crops from farmers and redistributed these crops to Americans in need (USU). This program was ultimately successful as it generated

as much as 2 billion dollars in growth for farmers (Gruber, 2023). Later, in 1939, the United States Government installed the first implementation of the food stamp program to combat lingering food insecurity at the end of the Great Depression. This program ultimately led to a total cost of 262 million dollars towards combating food insecurity and served over 20 million struggling Americans in over half of the nation's counties (USDA, 2025). Following this time period, the exuberant cost of World War II forced the government to ration food during the war, ensuring there was enough food for soldiers and citizens alike. While this time was irregular, it laid the groundwork for modern food stamps and rationing programs as the government was forced to experiment with solutions and programs. When the time came during Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty", Johnson implemented the national food stamp program as a cornerstone of his agenda. This program made food stamps a permanent part of American life and was estimated to help 4 million people for a cost of 360 million dollars annually (USDA, 2025). This program was unlike any other effort by the government as it was meant as a permanent program for longtime intervention not a crisis response tool. As a result, the government's role in assisting people with low food security was solidified and even expanded in later years as anti-poverty measures and federal nutrition programs were easily developed as crucial parts of the social safety net. In the 1980s, however, the political climate shifted rapidly with the election of Ronald Reagan in the 1981 election. Reagan's administration promoted a philosophy of smaller government and reduced federal spending. Ultimately, as a result, this period featured a series of cuts by the government to federal social programs such as those addressing hunger. Many of the programs that were introduced and expanded during the 1960s and 70s were cut by over 20% despite Reagan's promise that the social safety net would be maintained (Danziger and Haveman, 1981). For example the national food stamp program lost 2 billion dollars in funding and cut millions of Americans from the program (Roberts, 1981). With fewer federal funds available across the United States, cities began relying on organizations to combat growing food insecurity, specifically turning to the expansion of food banks and soup kitchens to support their citizens. The impacts of these new resources are still seen today as over 90% of food banks in the United States today were founded after 1980 and are still used across the country to support food-insecure people (Klempeper, 2024). In fact, it was not until the late 1990s when the food stamp program in the United States was expanded, and the USDA took a more substantial role in addressing hunger throughout the United States. By this point, however, food banks were ingrained in the American food strategy and became one of the driving factors against food insecurity.

Years after the Great Depression, food insecurity emerged as a pressing national issue during the early 2000s, reaching unprecedented levels as the 2008 financial crisis swept throughout the United States. This economic crisis led to widespread job losses, foreclosures, and wage stagnation, leaving many Americans struggling. Of course, millions of Americans correspondingly needed food. As a result of the crisis, food insecurity reached its highest level ever and was up 4% from previous years (USDA, 2009). These glaring issues forced the United States government to implement an expansion of national programs to combat the crisis. Specifically, the US government rapidly expanded federal programs like the national food stamp program and increased emergency food aid throughout the country through donations to food banks and school systems. Following the crisis, as a result of lingering elevated food insecurity rates, Washington continued to debate food stamp eligibility and the role that the federal government would have on national hunger. These debates continue to the present day as the conflict has become deeply political. Despite the fact that the country is modernizing in a

series of sectors such as technology and defense, food insecurity has remained a consistent challenge for the American people. The problem of food insecurity has experienced little improvement especially in comparison to other sectors and will continue to affect the country unless change occurs. That leads to the question: where is food insecurity most prevalent today, and how can we use this information to attempt to resolve this issue?

### **WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?**

The problem of food insecurity carries profound consequences for society, making it an important issue beyond a lack of food. Research shows that citizens suffering from food insecurity for even small periods of time are often trapped in a cycle of chronic health issues. Particularly, those suffering from food insecurity have a much higher chance of developing chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension (Ing et al., 2023). People suffering from food insecurity are forced into “feast or famine” feeding patterns, where individuals overeat when food is available and then go without food for days. These forced eating patterns disrupt metabolism and impair glucose control, contributing to higher risks of diabetes and other diseases (Hazzard et al., 2023). Additionally, food-insecure households usually rely on cheaper, calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods, further elevating the risk of insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. Although individuals suffering from food insecurity may eventually stabilize their food opportunities, the negative health effects caused by food insecurity are everlasting, as these people continue to fight with the diseases they contracted during their hardship. These problems make food insecurity an even more important and troubling challenge as the nation’s overall health is severely affected.

### **IMPACTS**

#### **National Policy and Politics**

National policy regarding food insecurity generally varies by political affiliation and administration. Throughout history, Democratic administrations have been more lenient and supportive of people struggling with food insecurity than Republican administrations. A good example of this trend can be observed today. Following the 2008 crisis, the Obama administration focused on food insecurity as a core issue in the expansion of the American social safety net. This prioritization led SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), or the modern food stamp program, to have the highest enrolled members at any time in history, with 47.6 million Americans in 2013, nearly 1 in 7 citizens (2012). Millions received support because of Obama’s increased funding to the program, allowing for greater coverage. Other policies the Obama administration enacted were the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010, which aimed to improve food quality for children across the United States. This program allocated \$35.9 billion in federal funds to improve children’s health by providing funds for free lunches, particularly in high-poverty school districts (“Healthy, Hungry Kids Act of 2010”). Despite being framed as a bipartisan effort, the legislation became politically decisive. In particular, it received heavy backlash from Republican lawmakers who opposed the additional spending and was mainly supported by the Obama administration and democrats who saw its long-term value. Overall, throughout Obama’s time in office, his administration increased the number of people receiving food stamps by a third and at its peak over 49 percent of Americans were receiving assistance (“Healthy, Hungry Kids Act of 2010”). While these efforts cost the government money, millions of people were assisted especially in the wake of the financial crisis.

During Trump's time in the Oval Office, following Obama, his administration implemented harsher food insecurity policies. Particularly, Trump implemented rules in 2019 to tighten ABAWD work requirements, removing around 700,000 Americans from SNAP eligibility (Fessler and Tresiman, 2019). Similarly, later in his presidency, the Trump administration proposed a series of bills attempting to limit government assistance, though they were halted by the COVID-19 pandemic and Democrats in Congress. Specifically, Trump proposed a bill aiming to reduce spending on SNAP programs by 217 billion dollars over the next 30 years, a plan which was projected to cut over 3 million adults and 1 million children from food assistance programs nationwide ("Trump 2019 Budget Roundup"). Trump continued these policies in his second term in office. In March of 2025, the USDA halted over \$1.2 billion in funding for food assistance programs such as the LFPA (local food purchase assistance) and LFS (local food for schools) (Schewe, 2025). Later that same year, Trump's implementation of the Big Beautiful Bill codified over \$286 billion dollars in SNAP benefit cuts over the next decade (Wexler, 2025). His policy included raising the required working age, shifting 25% of food availability to state discretion, and making it harder to receive SNAP benefits. Collectively, these measures are intended to reduce federal spending on food assistance programs, but also risk significantly increasing food insecurity for millions of Americans by 2026. Some analysts project that over 22 million Americans over the next decade will lose their SNAP eligibility as a result of this bill (20). Through the contrast between this legislation and Obama's legislation, the difference between the national legislation of Republican and Democratic administrations is evident.

Regardless of political affiliation, a defining factor of national food policy is cooperation during times of struggle or heightened need. Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, both parties recognised the urgent need for food assistance and passed a series of bipartisan relief bills to support struggling citizens. These bills included increasing SNAP benefits and implementing additional funding through programs such as P-EBT. A similar trend occurred during the 2008 financial crisis, as political affiliations were put aside to expand SNAP programs and support food banks and charities. Despite the fact that the nation's politics are frequently put aside in times of crisis, the issue of food insecurity is clearly political as under Republican administrations, food insecurity efforts clearly receive less funding.

### **Statewide Politics and Policy**

State-level policy regarding food insecurity represents stark contrasts between historically Republican and Democratic states. Under the structure of federal programs such as SNAP, state legislatures have strong power in how they choose to implement federal policies. As a result, historically Democratic states such as California, New York, and Massachusetts have placed a greater emphasis on food insecurity than historically Republican states. Additionally, governments in these democratic states have historically prioritized expanding eligibility, increasing benefits, and supplementing federal programs at a higher rate than governments in Republican states. See California: During 2022, California state lawmakers implemented a universal statewide school lunch and breakfast program regardless of income (*California Universal Meals*). This ensured that all California citizens had access to food despite the funding required to create and sustain this program which was around \$650 million annually (*California Makes Vital Investments in Free Schools Meals*). Another example comes from Washington State. In April of 2024, Washington received approval for a Summer EBT program for its citizens which they implemented in the summer of that year. Washington accepted over

500,000 kids into the program allocating \$120 for each child (Payne, 2024). While the government funds the benefits themselves, Washington had to pay for the administrative costs. Ultimately, for this reason, many Republican states opted out of this program such as Florida which rejected \$248 million in summer benefits in 2024, leaving 2.2 million eligible children hungry (Frankel, 2025).

A similar trend is observed in other Republican states as historically, Republican states emphasize limiting government intervention in their approach to food insecurity. This approach is highlighted by their stricter rules on eligibility, work mandates for able-bodied recipients, and shorter certification periods to receive food. These restrictions culminated in a greater portion of the population in red states suffering from food insecurity. An example of stricter legislation in a Republican state comes from Iowa which implemented new asset tests and SNAP barriers in 2023. During 2023, Iowa legislatures implemented a \$15,000 asset limit for SNAP recipients and an eligibility verification test making it more difficult to receive benefits (*Protect Snap*). Through this legislation, Iowa becomes one of only thirteen states with an asset limit and will most likely affect a significant portion of their current 287,000 SNAP recipients (Gruber-Miller and Akin, 2023). This example, when compared to the actions taken by Democratic states, illustrates the stark difference in statewide legislation between both parties.

As a result of statewide legislation, people in historically Republican states often suffer more from food insecurity than those in historically Democratic states. As of 2023, Mississippi and Louisiana, for example, exceeded the national average of residents suffering from food insecurity (13.5%) and instead had rates of 19.4% and 18.1%, respectively (*Food Security in the U.S.; Hunger and Poverty in Mississippi; Hunger and Poverty in Louisiana*). Meanwhile, historically democratic states such as New Jersey and Massachusetts had some of the lowest rates of food insecurity at 8.8% and 8.6%, respectively (*About Food Security in New Jersey, Food Insecurity Ranged from 7.4 Percent in New Hampshire to 18.9 Percent in Arkansas*).

While the difference between food insecurity rates in majority Democratic and majority Republican states is clear, the stark contrast is much different in swing states across the United States. States such as Ohio, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania present a more complex picture as their state legislatures are not dominated by a single party. Instead, modern state-wide elections in these states have gone both ways, representing modern swing states. As a result, these states follow trends based on their majority party and are consistently held at a standstill in food insecurity legislation. For example, current Republican Ohio Governor Mike DeWine has supported restrictions on statewide SNAP programs, such as limiting purchases of certain beverages and foods (*Culture War in your Shopping Cart*). Meanwhile, previous Democratic leadership in the state emphasized the importance of SNAP, even going as far as expanding the program to have broader coverage. This back-and-forth nature in purple states is represented in their food insecurity rates. For almost a decade, Ohio's food insecurity rate has hovered around the national average of 13.5% representing the state's lack of progress in food insecurity legislation. Pennsylvania, another modern swing state, has faced a similar challenge (*Hunger and Poverty Map in Ohio*). As of 2023, 13.2% of Pennsylvania residents were food insecure, representing the national average and a lack of progress by the Pennsylvania legislature (*Hunger and Poverty Map in Pennsylvania*). While states that were historically Democratic or Republican often follow trends in their policy on food insecurity, the political

landscape in various swing states actively shapes the national average and highlights a lack of progress across the nation.

### **Geographical Differences**

Another defining factor of food insecurity in the United States is geography. While food insecurity affects most people similarly, urban and rural food insecurity remain very different in nature and present a series of unique challenges to lawmakers. Food insecurity rates in rural and urban areas are 15.4% and 15.9% respectively, compared to the suburban rate of 11.7%, reflecting a higher national average and greater insecurity when compared to suburban regions (Baker, 2024). In rural areas, food insecurity is distinguished by a lack of economic opportunity and a lack of resources. Over 20% of rural regions in the United States are classified as food deserts according to the USDA (Bowen, 2023). This trend means that residents in these areas have low access to grocery stores and must travel long distances to purchase food. These features are paired with limited selection and higher prices, forcing these households to have restricted access to nutritious foods. The food deserts in rural areas are also unassisted by modern food banks and SNAP programs as a lack of population density leads to a lack of resources. Additionally, rural areas often lack the infrastructure necessary to have food banks or soup kitchens like urban areas do, leaving residents to suffer more acutely (Schoen, 2019). Food insecurity in rural areas is also the product of high poverty rates in these areas. Many rural jobs are low-income, lacking in benefits, or seasonal, leaving families weak and reliant on food support programs that do not exist (*Hunger in Rural Communities*).

In urban centers across the United States, the challenges presented to residents suffering from food insecurity are much different. Urban areas such as New York and Los Angeles are categorized by some of the highest living costs in the world. These costs make it difficult for low-income residents to support themselves despite access to supermarkets. Even though food is available in these areas, these households may have spent all their money on rent, leaving a small portion of their income for healthy and sustainable foods. Additionally, in urban centers, poverty rates are much higher than the national average, meaning that the inequality in food access is drastically different. While food pantries and soup kitchens exist in these areas, the sheer number of struggling residents often overwhelms their capacity. Unlike suburban neighborhoods, the dense population of people in need puts a strain on the support systems available in these areas, limiting their availability. While the circumstances between urban and rural areas are much different, some urban centers still feature food deserts. In fact, 96% of residents in food deserts lived in urban areas according to the USDA in 2019 (USAFacts, 2021). Specifically, in low-income urban neighborhoods, supermarket chains are sometimes hesitant to build in these areas because of safety and income concerns. This reluctance leaves residents in these neighborhoods to rely on corner or dollar stores for their meals, which mainly provide processed, calorie-dense food instead of vegetables and fruits. This phenomenon, known as a food swamp, represents a common problem as fast food outlets outnumber healthy food options, worsening problems with food insecurity.

While urban and rural areas suffer greatly from food insecurity, suburban neighborhoods are not as impacted. In particular, suburban neighborhoods tend to have a higher median income than rural and urban neighborhoods, representing a greater ability to purchase food in these areas. Additionally, suburban residents have greater access to food as there are many more full-service retailers such as Costco and Sam's Club in these areas. Relative to urban areas, it is

cheaper to live in suburban areas, leaving more money for food and also greater opportunities to purchase a car, improving food access. The greatest challenges in food security lie in rural and urban areas, as poverty and a lack of access to healthy food plague residents in these regions.

### **Inequality**

Social inequalities are another major factor in food insecurity rates across the United States. Historically, communities with high minority populations throughout the United States have suffered from redlining and have often been excluded from certain homeownership and investment opportunities. As a result of these challenges, poverty has been concentrated in these urban areas with majority minority communities. This has enforced modern food deserts as supermarket chains are hesitant to establish locations in areas with high poverty rates. That leaves these residents with a lack of access to a stable food supply and higher rates of poverty. According to the USDA, as of 2023, black households experienced food insecurity at a rate of 22% and Latino households at 17%, compared to under 10% for white households nationwide (Hales and Coleman-Jensen, 2024). These disparities in food insecurity rates demonstrate that food insecurity is intertwined with historical racial discrimination throughout the United States. For example, policies that pushed black residents into the same neighborhood or county are now being targeted as areas of food swamps and deserts. Modern retailers use this policy to outline places to avoid because of higher poverty in these areas creating systematic food inequalities marked by racial differences. Historical racial inequalities have shaped citizens' access to nutrition and a healthy lifestyle.

Similarly, economic status is one of the highest indicators of food insecurity throughout the United States. Households with lower incomes are disproportionately unable to afford sufficient, nutrient-rich food, forcing families to make trade-offs between groceries, rent, and healthcare. For example, families earning below 150% of the federal poverty line are the most likely to experience food insecurity, with rates around 35%, compared to less than 5% for households with average income (Rabbit et al., 2024). Low-wage workers, even those who are employed full-time, struggle to make ends meet and provide nutritious food for themselves. Single-parent households are especially vulnerable, with these households' food insecurity rates exceeding 30% (Hartline-Grafton, 2018). These rates are alarming, as it is evident that economic standing is a clear predictor of food insecurity. When paired with the present social inequalities, these social and economic disparities reveal that food insecurity in the United States is not a matter of personal circumstance but systematic inequality. Instead of being treated as a right, food is instead categorized by social and economic standing. In American society, historical discrimination, concentrated poverty, and insufficient safety nets have combined to create persistent barriers that limit access to adequate nutrition.

### **DISCUSSION**

The research presented highlights how the problem of food insecurity is politically and socially complex. Over the past decade, food insecurity rates have consistently risen, reflecting economic and social pressures and the failures of modern programs such as SNAP and school lunch initiatives, particularly for vulnerable populations. Overall, this research shows that the most vulnerable populations are poor minority groups in historically Republican states with a Republican national administration. Food insecurity has been shown to be about more than just lacking food. Instead the issue is intertwined with state and national politics, historical racism,

and geographical challenges. The statistics surrounding food insecurity show a clear discrimination against minority populations and those in deeply rural and heavily concentrated urban areas. While the problem is clear, the challenges that populations under these circumstances face goes much deeper than lacking food. Practices such as redlining have marked certain communities as targets for food insecurity forcing these people to lack access to healthy foods. In rural areas, low population density makes it difficult for assistance to be provided to people in need. In urban areas, the high concentration of people in need, when paired with food deserts and swamps, leaves food banks overwhelmed and people without food. The differences in the challenges that communities face across the nation drives the complexity in the issue. There is not a blanket solution as many citizens face different challenges and circumstances. The complexity of the problem of food insecurity is apparent in the lack of progress over the last decade. Today national food insecurity rates sit around 13.5% but were at 12.7% a decade earlier (Jensen et al., 2015 ). During this time period, the nation has not progressed in its fight against food insecurity. Instead, other strategies will have to be implemented to expand the nation's progress and make lasting change on the nation.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

With a clearly outlined problem and current solutions that have proved ineffective it is important to explore the other options the nation has. The current system with a combination of federal involvement and reliance on food banks has existed for almost 50 years now and has not garnered widespread progress for the American people. A defining problem with food banks is that they do not provide a long-term solution to the problem of food insecurity, but rather a bandaid (*The Hunger Industry: Does Charity put a band-aid on American inequality?*). Food banks were created to provide emergency food for residents in need, not to be lived off of like tens of millions of Americans do (*The Problem with Charitable Food*). Food banks allow the government and the nation as a whole to put off attempting to solve the problem of food insecurity and the complexities it brings. It is obvious food insecurity is not an easy problem and is intertwined with broader topics such as poverty, racism, and state politics all of which are complex topics within themselves. Additionally, food provided by food banks are historically low in nutritional value because of their canned and long-lasting nature (Oldroyd et al., 2022). Despite this challenge and the problems that are faced today, the United States can take steps in the right direction unlike it is doing now. Some of these steps could include continuing to modernize and expand SNAP benefits, attempting to reduce national poverty, and making more federal requirements for food assistance at the state level. As a result of the strength of federal funding, SNAP already provides a much greater amount of assistance than food banks do. With this in mind, expansions in SNAP that are only a very small portion of the 6.8 trillion dollar national budget could make an expansive positive impact on the nation. By offering SNAP benefits to more citizens and expanding federal control of SNAP allocation, the impacts of food insecurity would be reduced at a cost that is comparatively less than other solutions. Expansion would allow these citizens to save money and improve their well being while getting food than they would through food banks. Other steps the US government could take should be aimed at attempting to reduce national poverty. Actions such as increasing the federal minimum wage could have a massive impact on food insecurity as citizens will struggle less with providing for themselves. To that end, attempting to lower the costs of goods and housing in the United States would have drastic effects on food insecurity. While these solutions are much more difficult than expanding SNAP's reach, the government must make strides in these areas if they truly want to make an impact in the role of food insecurity in the United



States. Although food insecurity is a complex and difficult problem, the solutions that are being used now can be revised to have a much greater impact.

### CONCLUSION

Food inequality has clearly been a problem in the United States for many years and will continue to be a problem unless action is taken against it. Particularly, it is clear that citizens who are most vulnerable to suffer from food insecurity are poor, minority populations in urban and rural areas. While many people think of food insecurity as a problem with food, it is evident that food insecurity is a much deeper, systematic problem throughout the United States, which can only be solved by changing the strategy that has been used for over 50 years.

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