



RESEARCH REPORT

Tackling Food Insecurity by Bringing Data to Communities

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December 2019



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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Walmart Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We are grateful to the residents and stakeholders in the six communities we visited who shared their stories and experiences. This work would not be possible without their willingness to engage around how food insecurity has affected their counties and to have rich discussions on how to most effectively disrupt food insecurity locally.

We appreciate the contributions of Olivia Arena, Prasanna Rajasekaran, Clare Salerno, and Victoria Tran to this project and thank Serena Lei, Gillian Gaynair, and Meghan Ashford-Grooms for assistance with the report. We are grateful to Elsa Falkenburger for her review and comments on the draft.

Tackling Food Insecurity by Bringing Data to Communities

In 2018, an estimated 37 million Americans—including 12 million children—were considered “food insecure,” meaning that they could not afford an adequate diet (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019). It’s a reality that can have detrimental consequences (Gundersen and Ziliak 2014; Pooler et al. 2019): when people experience food insecurity, they are also more likely to have poor physical (Burke et al. 2016; Seligman, Laraia, and Kushel 2009) and mental health (Knowles et al. 2016)—no matter their age—and face economic hardship.

A family’s inability to afford a healthy diet is a symptom of underlying financial instability. Several large-scale factors contribute to this instability, including the costs associated with finding safe and affordable housing, using public transportation, and accessing health care. And across communities, the realities of structural racism, which contributes to high rates of incarceration and limited economic mobility, can further isolate families from supportive services and economic opportunities, thereby deepening their vulnerability to food insecurity. Collectively, these forces stress family budgets and ultimately undermine people’s ability to put food on their tables.

Ending food insecurity in the United States requires disrupting the root causes of economic adversity that many families face. Federal nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and school meals are the first line of defense, and charitable feeding provides vital assistance to many families. But real progress will be impossible without focusing on contributing conditions—such as high housing costs or barriers to accessing transportation to work or the grocery store—that erode families’ food budgets.

To help communities across the US develop more effective strategies for addressing food insecurity at its roots, we turned to data to better understand the interconnected factors that contribute to the problem and to identify opportunities for change. We examined not only the level of food insecurity among adults and children in counties across the country, but also measures of physical health, housing, income, and other contributing factors.¹ For instance, the share of a county’s residents who have diabetes, its unemployment rate and median credit score, the share of residents who live in rural areas—all these measures matter when crafting local solutions to disrupt food insecurity.

Data can illuminate problems, but data can also camouflage them. So we took the data to residents and local key informants in six different communities to get their reactions. Using a research approach called a Data Walk (Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015), we shared our findings with adults, young people, and influencers from housing, health, transportation, and other sectors to hear what they found useful and whether and how these data resonated with their lived experiences.

Through this process, we discovered that sharing the data generates wide-ranging conversations in communities about how to tackle the roots of food insecurity. We also learned that data without community context can paint an incomplete picture; this lesson demonstrates why engaging community residents in interpreting indicators about local conditions is crucial. For example, we learned that a county that has a low share of residents who are “housing cost burdened”—meaning that they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing—may have other housing problems that contribute to financial instability and food insecurity, such as low-quality housing. These insights help paint a more complete picture of the contributors to food insecurity in communities, and that picture can help policymakers, service providers, and community leaders understand where to intervene.

This report summarizes the conversations we had and the insights we gained from the six communities we visited:

- **Forrest County, Mississippi**, is in the south-central part of the state, includes the city of Hattiesburg, and is the home of the University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey University.
- **Fresno County, California**, is in the central portion of the state and contains the city of Fresno, which is the fifth-most-populous city in California.
- **Indiana County, Pennsylvania**, is east of Pittsburgh and is home to Yellow Creek State Park and Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
- **Perry County, Kentucky**, is in Eastern Kentucky, contains the county seat of Hazard, and is home to Hazard Community and Technical College.
- **Sebastian County, Arkansas**, is on the Oklahoma border, is the state’s fourth-most-populous county, and has two county seats: Greenwood and Fort Smith. Fort Smith is the second-largest city in the state.
- **Travis County, Texas**, is in Central Texas and contains the city of Austin, which is the state capital.

The appendix provides detailed information about the study methods and our strategies for choosing the six communities.

What Is a Data Walk?

A Data Walk is an interactive tool designed by the Urban Institute that engages communities as research partners. Specifically, the tool allows community stakeholders—including residents, researchers, program administrators, local officials, and service providers—to jointly review data about their community. In a large room such as a gym or conference room, participants rotate through “stations” where data are displayed visually and textually on posters that we hang on the walls, reflect in small groups on what the data mean, and collaborate to use their individual expertise to help improve policies, programs, and other drivers of community change.

For this project, Urban drew on data in its Disrupting Food Insecurity data dashboard, which we created in the first phase of this project to display county-level data related to food insecurity, and other publicly available information to create the posters for each community we visited. We collaborated with community-based organizations and local leaders to identify places to hold the Data Walks and to invite stakeholders and residents to participate.

Including Robust Data

Although the dashboard includes a range of county-level metrics that reflect factors associated with food insecurity, we wanted to further tailor indicators for each community to foster a robust conversation with local stakeholders. We interviewed key community informants ahead of each Data Walk to better understand local issues of concern so that we could include data that highlighted these topics. When possible, we also included information on factors that research suggests are important triggers of food insecurity but were not included in the dashboard because the data were not available for all US counties. Additional data points varied by community and included eviction rates, prevailing wages in the local economy, income disparities by race and ethnicity, incarceration rates, and the number of foster care placements. Combining the additional data with the dashboard information offered a rich depiction of each county and more opportunities for participants to engage with the material.

For the dashboard, every US county was placed into one of 10 peer groups based on food insecurity rates, related risk factors, and background characteristics. At each Data Walk, we included a poster

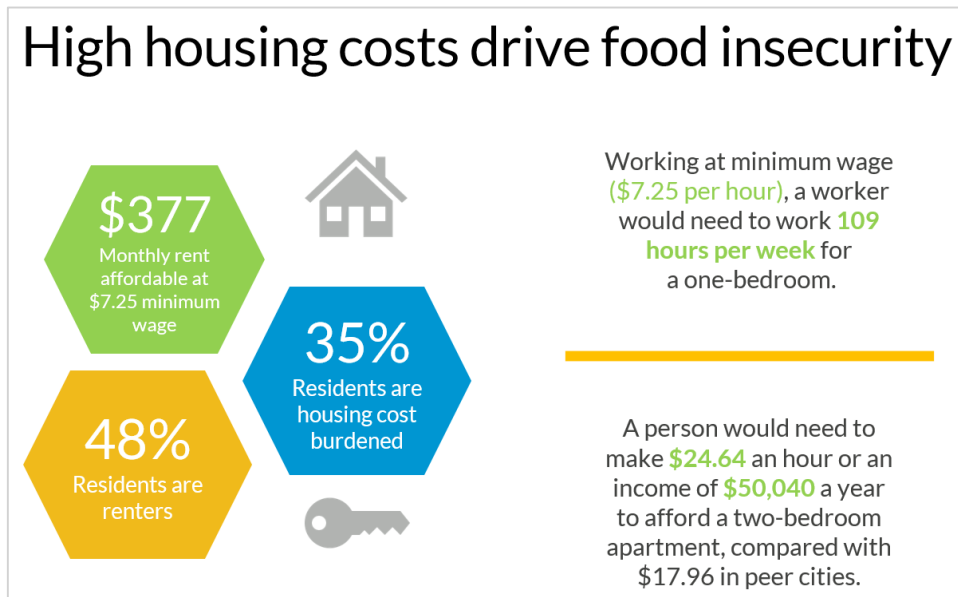
with a snapshot of other counties from the same peer group to give participants a chance to see where other communities were facing similar challenges.

In each of the six communities we visited, we held at least three Data Walks, one with service providers and local officials, one with adults who have low incomes and/or use public or charitable food assistance or other services, and one with teens whose families have low incomes and/or use public or charitable food assistance or other programs. These discussions yielded rich information about how the six communities view the factors that contribute to food insecurity and how they believe challenges could be addressed. The discussions with teens offered new insights into how young people perceive the factors that contribute to food insecurity and the best ways to engage them in solving problems in their communities.

Presenting the Data

The presentation of the information is crucial to a successful Data Walk: it should be clear and in a format that is easy for all participants to understand. As the examples below show (figure 1 and figure 2), we used simple charts and icons and labeled the posters with structured titles. We also often presented county rates alongside national, state, and/or peer group averages to provide context.

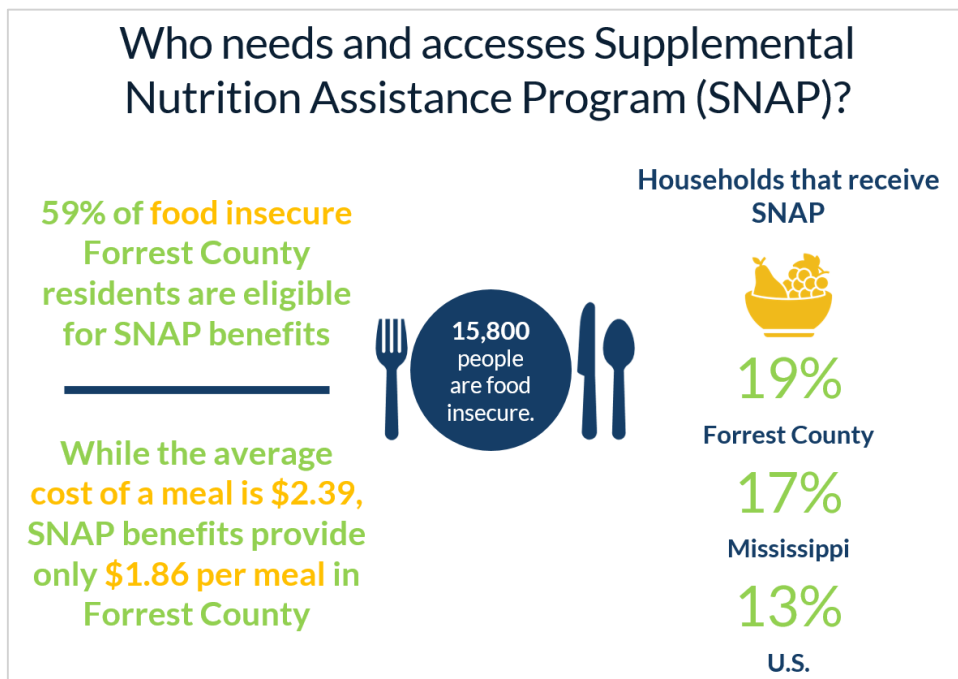
FIGURE 1
Sample Poster about Housing Costs



Sources: "Out of Reach 2019," National Low Income Housing Coalition, accessed July 29, 2019; "Map & Data," Eviction Lab, accessed June 18, 2019; Colin Holmes, "The State of the American Mover: Stats and Facts," Move.org, accessed July 10, 2019; US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2013–17 five-year estimates.

FIGURE 2

Sample Poster about SNAP Access



Sources: Feeding America, *Map the Meal Gap 2017*, accessed September 18, 2019; Elaine Waxman, Craig Gundersen, and Megan Thompson, “How Far Do SNAP Benefits Fall Short of Covering the Cost of a Meal?” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018); US Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2013–17 five-year estimates*.

Interpreting the Data

At each Data Walk, Urban team members led participants through the posters and facilitated conversations. Specifically, we wanted to know whether participants thought the data told an accurate story about their community and whether anything was missing from the presentation. After participants viewed the posters in small groups, we brought everyone together to discuss what it would take to address food insecurity in the community. Our hope was to generate ideas outside of food provision to families—for example, by helping families build their credit scores, improving access to transportation, or encouraging health care providers to issue “veggie prescriptions,” which provide coupons that can be redeemed for fresh fruit and vegetables at grocery stores and farmers’ markets. We used information from these discussions to inform this report.

Common Contributors to Food Insecurity

Food is often the first thing families forgo when they cannot afford other basic needs, so strategies to disrupt food insecurity must tackle the root causes of economic distress. We heard from Data Walk participants about how high housing costs, lack of transportation, low wages, and other challenges contribute to residents' financial problems and hinder their ability to afford healthy and nutritious food.

Housing Costs Squeeze Food Budgets

The United States is experiencing the worst affordable housing crisis since the 1930s. Wage stagnation and a chronic shortage of housing assistance are compounding the problem, making it increasingly difficult for low-income households to afford safe, decent housing (Sally et al. 2018). And as family budgets become increasingly squeezed by housing costs, their ability to afford food is diminished (Finnigan and Meagher 2019; Waxman 2017; Weinfield et al. 2014).

Housing costs vary across and within geographic regions. For our Data Walks, we visited housing markets with high costs as well as markets where homes are less expensive but where low wages make many residents feel that affordable, quality housing is out of reach. The housing crunch also makes it difficult for people to move to find higher-quality housing or neighborhoods that would offer better employment opportunities, schools, or access to services. In addition, those who want to move must have the funds for application fees and security deposits and may find their options limited if they have low credit scores.

Everything that looks like a piece of land, they are taking it up and trying to buy it out. It's not good. Children and seniors, everyone is trying to live together, trying to keep stuff down. It's the ones coming in that's got the money and are pushing us aside.

—Resident of Travis County, Texas

Residents in the six communities we visited spoke about how economic and demographic trends have shaped their access to housing: for example, booming economies often lead to an influx of newcomers, which increases costs and pushes some long-time residents to outlying counties in search of affordable solutions.

Data Walk participants also pointed to a lack of quality housing options, and they confirmed that high housing costs and the resulting housing cost burden should be central concerns for those tackling food insecurity. Participants also noted that low wages mean that even communities with lower housing costs may feel unaffordable and that the lack of legal protections of renters made the problem worse. Even people paying low rents said they had to spend more on utilities because of the poor quality of their homes. Several participants from different communities said that after paying their mortgage/rent and utilities, they had little money left for food or medicine. Some also said they relied on payday loans to keep up with expenses. Although that eased short-term cash-flow problems, it generated significant debt, which could undermine financial stability.

You'll rent an apartment that is poorly insulated, and you're looking at \$300 a month to heat it.

—Resident of Perry County, Kentucky

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT: REACTIONS TO THE DATA WALK

Sebastian County, Arkansas. Stakeholders who participated in our Data Walk identified concerns about Arkansas's limited legal protections for renters, considered among the weakest in the nation.² The pressure of rent increases, even small ones, contributes to food insecurity in the short term and prevents families with low incomes from building wealth over time.

Travis County, Texas. Stakeholders and residents told us that rapid growth in Austin had driven up the cost of living. Participants said many residents could not afford to live in their longtime neighborhoods. Those who have stayed are “doubling up”—that is, multiple generations are living together—to be able to afford the rent. Finding a new home brings new financial challenges, including application fees and landlords who require both a security deposit and first month's rent. Even having a housing voucher is not a guarantee of affordability because landlords can charge voucher holders these fees.

Perry County, Kentucky. Although Perry County has relatively low housing costs compared with other counties, Data Walk participants cited housing costs as one of the main factors contributing to food insecurity in the region. Participants also said the available housing was often of poor quality, making it expensive to maintain and heat. Housing instability is also a challenge for many families, who

move frequently either to try to find better housing or because of the threat of eviction. Service providers told us that high levels of instability can make reaching those in need of food assistance difficult.

Transportation Creates Barriers to Accessing Food

In all six communities we visited, stakeholders and residents identified transportation—both the lack of access and the cost—as one of the biggest barriers to accessing food, as well as jobs, health care, and child care. Although Data Walk participants were sometimes surprised to learn from the posters that residents of their communities were spending up to a third or more of their income on transportation, overall, we repeatedly heard from residents that transportation costs, including for private automobiles and public transit when available, were a significant strain on their budgets.

Across the six sites, Data Walk participants expressed frustration with public transit options. They said that traveling by bus was time-intensive; inadequate routes and schedules meant multiple transfers and long waits. In many communities, buses do not run late enough to accommodate those working second and third shifts. These inconveniences were amplified for people traveling with children and/or transporting heavy items, such as groceries. Those with physical limitations explained that they could not use buses to transport food from food banks or supermarkets and had to use cars, ask for rides, or pay for cabs or ride-shares. Relying on public transit to shop for groceries also limited the amount of food a household could purchase in one trip.

For many, choosing to live in an area with cheaper housing had led to increased transportation costs. And full-service grocery stores were not always within walking distance of areas with affordable rents. Even residents who had personal vehicles spoke of high gas prices and a lack of grocery stores in their neighborhoods as inhibitors to food access. For some residents already struggling to make ends meet, the costs of maintaining and fueling personal vehicles were added burdens.

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT: REACTIONS TO THE DATA WALK

Fresno County, California. Transportation options vary across Fresno, which is an extremely large county. Stakeholders in rural areas reported that residents had to pay upwards of \$60 for a ride to a grocery store more than 30 minutes away. Bus transportation to and from the city of Fresno was usually offered only once a day. For those using transit to shop for groceries, frozen and refrigerated items could melt or spoil in the hours it took to run errands.

Residents noted that bicycle infrastructure was much better in the more affluent northern and eastern parts of the city of Fresno. For residents who travel by bicycle or on foot, the extremely hot and dry weather also created challenges for getting around.

For some counties, a lack of public transportation was widespread.

Travis County, Texas. Driving is the dominant mode of transportation in this sprawling county, and public transit options are limited. Residents said that because support services are often in central Austin, displaced communities that have moved to the outskirts of the county are far from the services that help families meet their basic needs.

Perry County, Kentucky. Given Perry County's physical size and lack of transportation infrastructure, residents without a car or with limited funds for gas and automobile maintenance often find it challenging to access important services and programs, including grocery stores, food pantries, health clinics, and job training. Residents were encouraged to hear that a pilot project was being launched to provide shuttle services to grocery stores and health care, but its sustainability and reach were uncertain. Residents were concerned that the service would not help households outside of the city of Hazard.

Employment and Wages

Low incomes and unstable employment are significant challenges that affect food insecurity. Many families have tight budgets and little or no assets, which leaves them financially vulnerable to unexpected expenses like a medical emergency or car repair. Job loss, reduced work hours, and low wages can strain household budgets, and borrowing from the food budget is common when families face such challenges.

Although the overall unemployment rate in the US is fairly low, unemployment data do not account for people who are underemployed (e.g., working part time or gig jobs) or have stopped looking for work. In addition, unemployment rates vary among residents; those with limited education and skills and people of color typically experience greater challenges in finding stable work. In the communities we visited, residents and stakeholders indicated that underemployment is a serious problem. To make ends meet, many people work multiple jobs, none of which provides benefits or stable wages.

Because spending on food can be flexible, families reportedly prioritized paying set bills like rent over buying more or higher-quality food. Many residents supplemented food budgets with federal nutrition programs and charitable assistance. We heard concerns about the risk of accepting a raise or

job offer if increased earnings might result in the loss of SNAP benefits or a child care subsidy, leaving a family with fewer resources.

Some people aren't working so that they can continue to qualify for subsidized insurance. If your child has diabetes, you got to do what you can to get the care covered. Unfortunately, that means one of the parents not working.

—Resident of Indiana County, Pennsylvania

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT: REACTIONS TO THE DATA WALK

Indiana County, Pennsylvania. Stakeholders shared that 31 percent of Indiana County residents are workers whose incomes are higher than the federal poverty level but who struggle to cover their expenses³ (a situation that is sometimes described as being “asset limited, income constrained, and employed,” or ALICE). Additionally, 13 percent of the population lives in poverty.⁴ Residents said many of them fall just outside the eligibility limits for SNAP and other benefits.

The main contributors to income and employment challenges varied across locations.

Perry County, Kentucky. With the decline of the coal economy, residents are struggling to find stable, well-paying jobs or the job training to access such opportunities. Data Walk participants indicated that most new opportunities were in the retail or service industries, where many jobs are part time and offer relatively low wages. Additionally, these jobs offer few benefits, reducing the potential for employment to improve people’s overall economic outcomes.

Teens we spoke with described feeling pessimistic about finding stable employment that would allow them to stay in the region. Although Data Walk participants expressed support for new investments in vocational training for students, some educators and students raised concerns about the risk of pushing students into one career path too early or discouraging students from entering college.

Sebastian County, Arkansas. In the wake of factory closures from the previous decade, residents are still having difficulty finding full-time, well-paying jobs. Meanwhile, rising housing and transportation costs add to families’ financial burdens. Residents particularly commented on how limited public transportation makes it difficult to access jobs. Bus service in Fort Smith, the main city in Sebastian County, does not operate in the evenings. And residents with food-processing jobs located away from the city center have difficulty finding reliable transportation to get to work.

Health

Food insecurity is associated with poorer health outcomes at every stage of life, from pregnancy to childhood and adolescence to adulthood and older age. The relationship between food security and health is often bidirectional (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2013), meaning that poor health is both an outcome and a predictor of food insecurity. Being in poor health can make getting a job or staying employed more difficult, thus contributing to food insecurity. On the other hand, food insecurity often worsens existing health conditions (Gundersen and Ziliak 2018).

Food-insecure households that also have health challenges often consume cheaper, less healthy foods; eat less; and have to make trade-offs between purchasing food and medicine or medical supplies (Berkowitz, Seligman, and Choudhry 2014). This cycle can be particularly harmful for people with chronic diseases related to diet. For instance, some participants with type 2 diabetes (as well as people who cared for someone with the disease) said healthy food was too expensive for their budgets. They said they tried to incorporate healthy items as best they could but were still weighing quantity against quality. And some residents said they sometimes delayed or skipped filling prescriptions to afford food. These practices also occurred in families with children as parents tried to limit health care costs for themselves to be able to provide sufficient food for the household, as well as among older adults living on fixed incomes.

Some residents also reported that their lack of access to mental health and dental health services prevented them from finding and/or maintaining stable work. One resident said many people associated poor dental health with substance use disorders rather than a lack of access to dental care and that as a result prospective employers were less likely to hire people with these problems. However, residents said that even when free or low-cost mental health or dental services were available, meeting program requirements was a challenge, as was finding providers who accepted their health care coverage if they had it.

COUNTY SPOTLIGHT: REACTIONS TO THE DATA WALK

Forrest County, Mississippi. Compared with other US counties, Forrest County has pronounced health challenges. It has high rates of diabetes, low birthweight, and uninsured adults. Participants expressed frustration with high health care costs and Mississippi's decision not to expand Medicaid coverage. Residents also spoke about people with diabetes experiencing blood sugar spikes at the end of the month when they run low on funds and have to choose between their insulin and eating.

Opioid abuse is also a health challenges that many counties are facing.

Indiana County, Pennsylvania. Indiana County's drug overdose death rate was the eighth-highest in the state in 2019; abuse of fentanyl and other drugs is a major challenge for the region as neighboring counties rank even higher.⁵ Substance use disorders and related health issues contribute to and are a condition of food insecurity. Those struggling with addiction often do not have the financial resources or transportation options to access healthy food. As a result, children may be at risk of food insecurity. Residents and stakeholders in Indiana County spoke about the increase in informal fostering as families stepped in to care for children of those struggling with substance use disorders.

Long-Standing Contextual Challenges

Food insecurity is a household economic condition shaped by larger social and structural barriers. Topics such as historical and contemporary racism, prejudice against immigrants, and mass incarceration emerged during our Data Walk conversations. These insights underline the importance of looking deeper into who lives in traditionally underresourced areas, who may be excluded from some programs and services, and who may be more difficult to reach. Residents and stakeholders identified the importance of thinking more intentionally about how local food security interventions are shaped by social and structural issues and how these forces can be addressed as part of a community's response to food insecurity.

RACIAL SEGREGATION AND INJUSTICES

Local stakeholders and residents were concerned that examining data exclusively at the county level might conceal disparities across cities or towns or between towns and outlying areas. People of color consistently have higher rates of food insecurity and poverty than white people do, in large part because of structural racism's ongoing effects on resources and opportunities.

Participants spoke about the various geographic boundaries (for example, railroad tracks, highways, and less formal demarcations such as north-south city divisions) that often segregate communities by income and race or ethnicity. These geographic divisions often carry stigmas and stereotypes for those who live, work, and/or go to school in certain areas.

Historical redlining has led to limitations on where people of color can live and their ability to purchase homes and build assets (Rothstein 2017), which are important buffers against food insecurity. These communities have also experienced persistent disinvestment, which has resulted in a dearth of basic infrastructure and amenities. Data Walk participants of color said they were distressed about the

lack of affordable single-family housing, quality schools, local health services, and other resources in their neighborhoods. Many residents of color were living in food deserts, and accessible local stores were often small and had food that was expensive and of low quality. Residents had to travel to other parts of their county to access full-service grocery stores. They noted that as they got closer to communities with more resources, the racial makeup of neighborhoods changes—they become more predominantly white. Residents also shared incidents of discrimination, including being followed and having their bags searched, in public spaces such as grocery stores.

Participants were frustrated with the continued lack of investment in their communities and concerned that researchers and policymakers were more likely to study them because of their disadvantage than to use the information to generate meaningful responses. Some residents and stakeholders said the legacy of racism and discrimination had created distrust between African American residents and white nonprofit service providers as well as other institutions, such as banks.

THE IMMIGRATION ENVIRONMENT

Despite their contributions, many immigrants face barriers to opportunities that increase their likelihood of struggling with food insecurity. Some may be isolated by poverty, limited English proficiency, citizenship status, or discrimination. Any combination of these can make meeting basic needs and maintaining resilient households and communities difficult.

Many stakeholders pointed out that the available data may not accurately reflect the immigrant population that lives in the counties. During some site visits, we had limited success finding advocates from immigrant communities to participate in Data Walks, and in some areas, local stakeholders had limited contact with immigrants, making understanding their needs difficult. There are concerns that with fears of evolving public charge and other immigration policies, immigrants may be avoiding public assistance programs for which they are eligible.⁶

Some immigrants have faced difficulties when applying for assistance. For example, the incomes of farmworkers—many of whom are immigrants—fluctuate with the season, and reapplying for benefits with each change can be burdensome. Data Walk participants said immigrants often form networks of support for accessing food and other resources.

Many Data Walk participants noted that undocumented people might not ask for resources that could help them because they fear being deported or risking their prospects for citizenship. We heard stories of children as young as 7 years old expressing concern about deportation.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Many people know that communities hit with a major disaster need and receive immediate food assistance. However, the persistent food insecurity that may come with the long periods of economic dislocation that follow a natural disaster receives less attention, as do the challenges faced by communities that experience smaller, chronic disasters like seasonal flooding.

As the climate continues to change and storms intensify, many communities may experience weather-related disruptions on a more frequent basis. In a recent report, Urban found that the financial impacts of disasters vary by the magnitude of the disaster and who is affected (Ratcliffe et al. 2019). We found that communities that experienced smaller-sized disasters and communities of color had the most difficult recoveries. Negative impacts extend across most measures of financial health, including credit scores, debt in collections, bankruptcy, credit card debt, and mortgage delinquency and foreclosures. This financial hardship, damage to or loss of a home, and disruption to agriculture can leave people and communities exposed to food insecurity.

We heard from stakeholders in multiple communities about the persistent impact of disasters even after significant time had elapsed. In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, some residents continued to suffer from the effects of tornadoes in 2017, as well as ongoing flooding in low-lying areas after major rainfalls. Fresno, California, increasingly faces fire risk, and Fort Smith, Arkansas, experienced historic flooding in 2019.

For many counties, recovering from disasters becomes a norm, rather than a rarity. When households and organizations must continue to spend money and time on recovery, resources that could have been used to meet other needs are squeezed, and the ability to save for future challenges is curtailed. We heard from the Salvation Army in Hattiesburg that it is still not at full capacity to provide services as it continues to rebuild from tornadoes in 2013 and 2017. For residents, a disaster often means living for extended periods in substandard housing that can have dire effects on health.

Those kinds of low-attention disasters, they don't get the national attention. They have major economic impacts that are hit by people personally.

—Stakeholder in Forrest County, Mississippi

INCARCERATION

Residents and stakeholders said incarceration is a shock that leads to food insecurity. The incarceration of a family member often depletes a household's income and leads to additional costs because of legal fees and the travel costs of visitations. Incarceration also may disqualify people from employment and some forms of assistance after their release. Other households may also be affected by incarceration; residents spoke about informal foster care, when a parent goes to jail and another family member steps in to care for a child.

It's not just for the person in prison, it's the entire family [that's affected and becomes food insecure]. I have to take the kids because you're locked up, and I have to pay this and that. That's the unaccounted for foster care system that goes on, because now I have to take care of my niece and nephew.

—Resident of Sebastian County, Arkansas

We heard about gaps in food assistance and other types of support for people leaving the criminal justice system. Although some states have removed the lifetime ban on SNAP benefits for people with felony drug convictions, other states maintain some type of modified ban. In addition, some localities prohibit people with felony convictions from receiving housing assistance, which makes finding a stable home difficult for many returning residents. Stakeholders and residents expressed concern that landlords and rental companies sometimes take advantage of justice-involved people, offering substandard living conditions.

Getting a job can be difficult for people with a criminal record, and that in turn can contribute to food insecurity among returning residents, many of whom lived in poverty before incarceration (Looney and Turner 2018).

Action Steps for Tackling Food Insecurity at Its Roots

Tackling the root causes of food insecurity requires communities to take a more intentional, holistic approach to the issue. That means weaving strategies for bolstering family food resources into broader efforts to address the causes and consequences of financial instability—such as helping families find

affordable housing, access health care, and increase earnings and assets. (Cross-cutting strategies that bring these different domains together can be found in the Disrupting Food Insecurity dashboard.) Many of these major challenges and solutions need to be tackled at multiple levels, from the neighborhood to the national level.

In the sections below, we discuss some steps that communities might take to start or expand conversations about disrupting food insecurity at the local level. We gained important insights from our six community visits, particularly around the importance of data for local decisionmaking and the crucial need to include a range of voices, especially those of young people. We also offer a few examples of innovative approaches that communities are taking to address food insecurity.

Use Data to Build Evidence of Community Challenges

Presenting food insecurity data alongside information about other, related challenges and community characteristics is a compelling way of engaging community members in a wide-ranging conversation about how to tackle food insecurity at its roots. Across the six communities, the idea that food insecurity solutions need to address the intersecting challenges that make affording food difficult resonated with residents and stakeholders. Residents with lower incomes in particular were quick to point out that they routinely have to make trade-offs among basic needs and that focusing on only one area of need does not square with the realities they experience.

Data Walk participants enjoyed having the opportunity to engage with information about housing needs, transportation access, and other issues in their communities and to discuss how those connect to food insecurity and larger concerns about financial stability and economic opportunity. Below are some insights to keep in mind when working with communities to gather evidence on the challenges they face:

- Recognize that the data shared are only the starting point. It will not tell the entire story.
- Ask residents where they think more data are needed to better reflect their experience.
- Consider gathering more hyperlocal data to help communities mobilize around changes specific to their needs.
- Think about the role of data beyond a single location. For example, our conversations in Travis County, Texas, often evolved into discussions about the dislocation of residents into surrounding counties and the mismatch between the location of social services and the areas where low- and middle-income people live.

BOX 1

Designing a Data Walk

Hosting a Data Walk takes time and thoughtful planning, but the results can be rewarding.

The first step is to consider your goals for the event. What do you want to learn? Outline those goals, and then make decisions about logistics, data points to highlight, and discussion questions. For the food insecurity project, we used Data Walks to gain a more robust understanding of existing quantitative data. But they can also help you get input for a needs assessment, build consensus around a particular community challenge, or empower stakeholders to organize around an issue.

It's also important to plan for after the event. How will you debrief and help participants synthesize what they have learned? We paired the Data Walk with a formal research activity—focus groups—but more informal follow-ups work too.

Think carefully about how to recruit and target participants for the Data Walk. Consider what each party you invite will bring to and take from the event. How will you accommodate the various needs and interests of families, youth, adults, service providers, officials, and researchers? Should you hold one event or several for different groups? You will also need to consider accessibility and transportation. When working with adults, consider providing child care so that parents can fully participate in the Data Walk and accompanying activities. Other important questions to consider are: Are you working with communities of a certain faith or strong cultural norms and cultures? What kinds of language barriers might be present? Will you need to hire interpreters?

Finally, consider the consequences of presenting certain data. What are the risks of combining various groups of people for an honest conversation about the subject matter? Discovering potential risks or challenges does not mean you should forgo a Data Walk; you have an opportunity to brainstorm ways to mitigate, bypass, or be transparent about any potential negative consequences.

Notes: The material in this section is adapted from Brittany Murray, Elsa Falkenburger, and Priya Saxena, *Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015). For more information on holding a Data Walk, see Brittany Murray, Elsa Falkenburger, and Priya Saxena, "Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities," Urban Institute, YouTube video, November 18, 2015, <https://youtu.be/wD8I4JOUyRM>.

Include More Voices at the Table

One thing we learned from our visits to the six communities is that talking to the “usual” stakeholders—service providers, government administrators, and charitable food providers—is not enough. To get an understanding of the ways that households become food insecure, it is crucial to include a range of voices, particularly those of people who have experienced food insecurity and have participated in food assistance programs and young people whose families have faced this challenge.

Diverse voices are needed to capture an authentic picture of the problems people face. Here are some approaches that communities can take to make that happen:

- Collaborate with local service providers, religious institutions, and others who have the trust of and relationships with immigrant households. Such providers can help encourage immigrants' participation in Data Walks and ensure their safety.
- Actively engage with US-born residents of color, who often feel that they have been excluded from discussions about addressing challenges and that a real commitment to addressing persistent disparities in food insecurity does not exist.
- Proactively work with families of incarcerated people and returning residents to address the risk of food insecurity and improve access to supports and opportunities.
- Actively seek the insights of people who receive food assistance on program design and policy priorities.
- Recognize the role that many teens play in managing household resources and helping their families cope with food insecurity (Waxman, Popkin, and Galvez 2015). Consult them on how the community can better meet their needs, and invite them to be part of building next-generation strategies. Another way to include youth voices would be for charitable organizations or other community stakeholder groups to create a teen advisory group to assist with program design and outreach efforts or to involve them in running local harvest shares, where they can access free fresh fruits and vegetables (Batko, Popkin, and Arena 2019).
- Build supports for youth who are transitioning from high school. Students may have had access to free and reduced-price lunches in high school, but once they enroll in job training or college, they no longer can access those services. This problem can be especially acute for teens who leave the foster care system and lack a support network to help them find jobs and housing.
- Engage young people to serve as a bridge to different ethnic, racial, and cultural communities. Youth are often translators for their families, so by engaging them, stakeholders may be able to reach older generations, non-English speakers, and people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

BOX 2

County Spotlight: Solutions in Action

Young people are full of innovative ideas to address food insecurity. Piloting food programs that are developed and operated by teens has successfully mobilized resources in other communities (Galvez et al. 2018).

- During the Data Walk in **Perry County, Kentucky**, teens expressed a desire to start a mobile grocery service to assist with charitable food donations and food deliveries to those with physical limitations or limited access to transportation. Also, a few high school students there run a café that provides a gathering space for the community and won a competition of teen business pitches. This type of contest could be applied to addressing food insecurity.
- Students have played a crucial role in motivating colleges and universities to take steps to combat food insecurity. Campuses have responded by developing on-site food pantries and creating educational initiatives on nutrition and budgeting for students and staff members. In **Forrest County, Mississippi**, we learned that the College and University Anti-Hunger Alliance of Mississippi is working on this issue across the state. Also, the University of Southern Mississippi School of Social Work runs a food pantry, known as the Eagle’s Nest, for the university’s students, faculty, and staff.^a

^a“College Anti-Hunger,” The Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi, accessed November 6, 2019, <http://www.healthy-miss.org/college-anti-hunger/>.

Foster Collaborative Efforts

Our engagement with stakeholders and residents illuminated a range of existing partnerships and ideas for expanding collaborative efforts to cut across the challenges that drive food insecurity. Many communities are connecting health care services and healthy food access—for example, health care providers are offering fruit and vegetable prescriptions for patients with diet-related health conditions. Such programs have positively affected the health and economy of participating counties; initial research suggests that participants make healthier lifestyle choices and experience decreased body mass index, weight loss, improvements in blood sugar control, and household savings.⁷ Steps that communities can take to enhance collaboration across programs and sectors include the following:

- Expand the private sector’s involvement in food access work, which might include bringing more retailers into programs that boost the value of SNAP benefits for healthy food purchases.

- Bring health care providers to residents by holding health events during which residents can receive immunizations and other health care alongside meals or food and housing assistance services, preferably at accessible locations in the community.
- Offer tailored food pantry boxes that support effective diabetes management and other health needs.

Stronger partnerships will increase awareness of complementary services among stakeholders working on similar issues and foster opportunities to share ideas and resources. We found a real need and desire for this among stakeholders. Here are a few approaches for improving communication within counties that stakeholders shared with us:

- Maintain a coalition that regularly brings together stakeholders who work on issues that intersect with food insecurity, including community health workers and public and private social services in the county.
- Develop a portal or interactive service web page that documents new programs and available services.
- Design a shared database to track type and number of services that residents access across local organizations to help better engage and follow up with clients.
- Leverage social media as a channel for providers to advertise services and events to residents.

BOX 3

County Spotlight: Solutions in Action

Many rural communities are implementing creative strategies to combat food insecurity, such as developing a universal screening tool to determine eligibility for program services and partnering among health and charitable food organizations. **Indiana County, Pennsylvania**, has developed a uniform tracking system for all social service programs. This system allows service providers in the county to see who is repeatedly accessing various services. It has allowed for targeting outreach and providing wraparound services to the highest-need populations.

Indiana County is also thinking through how service providers can partner to better meet the needs of their residents. For example, the New Life Community Church has partnered with a halfway house to assist those who were formerly incarcerated or are seeking recovery for substance use disorder. The church provides grocery deliveries, clothing, and nutrition education as people transition from residential treatment to home. Stakeholders explained that the partnership has been a huge support as people work to reintegrate into their community. This model of combining services could be especially valuable for pairing health services, particularly substance abuse treatment, with food services.

Appendix. Community-Based Participatory Methods

Urban conducted site visits to six counties. In preparation for each visit, we conducted interviews with stakeholders to collect contextual information. During site visits, we facilitated Data Walks with stakeholders (e.g., service providers, leaders of charitable food organizations, local officials, health care providers, and educators) and residents about food access and the factors that contribute to food insecurity. Within each county, we facilitated up to four Data Walks, with approximately 8 to 12 participants per group. This fieldwork generally included one Data Walk with stakeholders, two with adults at risk of food insecurity, and one with youth ages 13 to 17 at risk of food insecurity.

The research team partnered with community-based organizations to plan and recruit participants for the Data Walks. Researchers facilitated these gatherings at community centers, libraries, service provider offices, and community spaces (e.g., a food bank). The Data Walks typically lasted 1.5 hours, including time for introduction, discussion, and incentive dispersal. Participants in the Data Walks for adult and youth residents received \$25 in cash, and we provided a meal for all participants at the start of each discussion.

We selected a small group of communities for this research because community-based participatory research approaches are intensive. We looked across counties to draw a sample of six that varied across important characteristics, including food insecurity rate, geography, housing costs, and financial well-being. They are Fresno County, California; Forrest County, Mississippi; Indiana County, Pennsylvania; Perry County, Kentucky; Sebastian County, Arkansas; and Travis County, Texas.

Notes

- ¹ Caroline Ratcliffe, Elaine Waxman, Cary Lou, Hannah Hassani, and Victoria Tran, “Disrupting Food Insecurity,” Urban Institute, October 22, 2019, <https://apps.urban.org/features/disrupting-food-insecurity/index.html>.
- ² “Legislation Changing in Many States to Make Them Less Landlord-Friendly,” Rental Housing Journal, March 19, 2019, <https://rentalhousingjournal.com/legislation-changing-in-many-states-to-make-them-less-landlord-friendly/>.
- ³ See “Indiana County, Pennsylvania ALICE Report” at “What Is Alice?” United Way of Pennsylvania, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.uwp.org/alice/about-alice/>.
- ⁴ US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2013–17 five-year estimates, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes/2017/5-year.html>.
- ⁵ See 2019 data for Pennsylvania, based on 2015–17 estimates, at County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, “Drug Overdose Deaths,” accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/pennsylvania/2019/measure/factors/138/data>.
- ⁶ “Public Charge,” National Immigration Law Center, accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.nilc.org/issues/economic-support/pubcharge/>.
- ⁷ See the “Farmacy” program case study at “Farmacy—Healthy Food Access in Appalachia,” Central Appalachian Network, June 11, 2019, <https://www.cannetwork.org/farmacy-healthy-food-access-in-appalachia/>.

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