

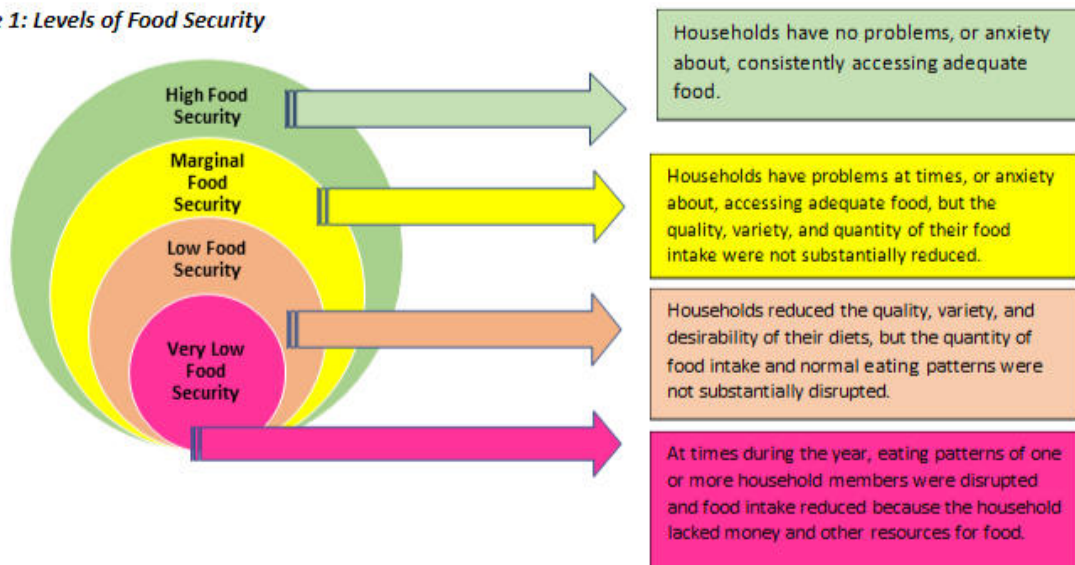
What is Food Insecurity?

Imagine it is time for a person to buy food. It is expected this individual would simply travel to a grocery store or food provider to purchase the needed items. But there are factors to consider for this action:

- What if the nearest grocery store is over a 30-minute drive away?
- What if this individual does not have a car?
- What if the public transportation system is not adequate or non-existent?
- What if the individual has a disability making getting or transporting food difficult?
- What if they have financial limitations preventing them from buying the amount of food needed?
- What if access to healthy food ingredients and items is limited in their area?
- What if other expenses necessary for living take priority and limit the purchase of healthy foods?
- What if they are struggling to not only provide themselves with healthy meals, but they have others in their household they are struggling to feed?
- What if a child is not getting proper nutrition and constantly experiencing hunger?

These issues and experiences are just examples in the landscape of food insecurity. For approximately 38 million Americans, food insecurity is a very real problem causing hunger, inadequate nutrition, poor physical and mental health, as well as other associated negative consequences.¹ In Missouri, from 2019 to 2021, the prevalence of households that experienced food insecurity was estimated at 2,503,000.² The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a household level economic and social condition of limited access to food. This is not to be confused with hunger, whereas the latter is viewed as an individual physiological condition that may result from food insecurity.² According to the USDA, an individual’s status or ability to secure food can range in a continuum described in the figure below.

Figure 1: Levels of Food Security



Increased Food Costs

As the COVID-19 pandemic transitioned into an endemic in the U.S., communities continued to experience rapidly increasing food costs due to national inflation. In 2022, grocery prices increased by a rate of 11.8% from the previous year, resulting in the swiftest price increase since the 1980’s.⁷ However, the level as to which this has increased food insecurity is still debatable. Some experts have argued although the cost of food has gone up, actual food insecurity has not increased as a rate across all populations since 2019.⁸ One explanation offered is some rates may have gotten better or worse in certain communities, without the overall national rate changing significantly. Another explanation is that government support programs and nonprofits have been successful in preventing food insecurity. For example, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits increased in 2022 nearly 3% across the U.S. nationally, the length of time households were enrolled in SNAP also increased in this time.⁸ Data also suggests 2022 household use of food pantries was up 4.4% from 2019 nationwide.⁹

Figure 2: Food Security Influencers



Actions Combatting Food Insecurity

Some fund recipients have looked for innovative ways to connect the deliverables of their program with preexisting food services aiming to decrease food insecurity. The Missouri Health Disparities funding supports community projects with health agencies and connects grant recipients and community members with resources that provide food and other resources. Fund recipients have partnered with food banks as a location for outreach events. By offering vaccinations at food bank locations, underserved populations are receiving health protection and access to food resources. Lewis County Health Department has successfully partnered with a meat packing plant to offer vouchers for meat supply from the provider given with COVID-19 home testing kits and COVID-19 vaccination education and appointment information. The department reached 200 households with this education/voucher handout to those who face food insecurity.

The Missouri Health Disparities Program Office is currently working with the Missouri Department of Social Services (DSS) to better connect outreach efforts with food services, such as SNAP or state operated food banks. Often Community Health Workers encounter citizens not looking for services provided under this funding but are seeking food provision resources. This is a great opportunity to connect these community members with their needs and lay a foundation for a pathway to future healthcare services. In a reciprocal fashion, DSS can share services being carried out under this funding with their client base. This is a small step towards decreasing silos and better sharing services across all areas for underserved Missourians. Future partnerships in outreach efforts could combine agency services for more impactful community events.

In terms of national objectives, the President's Office has announced a goal of ending hunger and increasing healthy eating activity by 2030 in effort to reduce diet-related disease while also reducing health disparities associated with food insecurity.¹⁰ In advancement of this goal and in cooperation with existing federal work, the White House has outlined a strategy aimed at reducing hunger while improving nutrition and health. The strategy has identified actions across five pillars and include the following: 1) Improve food access and affordability, 2) Integrate nutrition and health, 3) Empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy food choices, 4) Support physical activity for all, and 5) Enhance nutrition and food security research.¹⁰ Altogether, these opportunities and efforts actively combat the disproportionate impact that food security has on public health in our communities.

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