

## RESEARCH: FOOD INSECURITY & HUNGER

The Native American community still suffers from a much higher rate of food insecurity and hunger than the general population. The rates of food insecurity and hunger among Native Americans are twice the already too high rates for the general U.S. population, and three times higher than the rates for White Americans.<sup>i</sup>

“The many issues that overlap with food insecurity, including housing, social isolation, chronic or acute health problems with limited healthcare access, and low wages or unemployment, only exasperate the difficulty. And with COVID-19, many Native Americans were left in crowded homes and vulnerable to the virus. Many lives were lost – proportionately more than for any other ethnic group in the U.S. – and many tribal communities continue to face a COVID-19 burden.”<sup>ii</sup>

In addition, the association between poverty or income and food insecurity has been well documented. “Rates of food insecurity, particularly very low food security, tend to increase as unemployment increases and income decreases.”<sup>iii</sup> “Those with lower income are more likely to be food insecure than those with higher income: More than a third of households at or below the federal poverty level (FPL) are food insecure.”<sup>iv</sup> In addition, the USDA also notes that households with children are more impacted by food insufficiency.<sup>v</sup>

### **Background and Definitions**<sup>vi</sup>

In 2006, USDA introduced new language to describe ranges of severity of food insecurity. USDA made these changes in response to recommendations of an expert panel convened at USDA's request by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies. Although new labels were introduced, the methods used to assess households' food security remained unchanged, so statistics for 2005 to now are directly comparable with those for prior years. The following labels define ranges of food security:

**Food Security** - Food security means access by all people [in the household] at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

- **High food security** (old label=Food security): no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
- **Marginal food security** (old label=Food security): one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake

### **Food Insecurity**

- **Low food security** (old label=Food insecurity without hunger): reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- **Very low food security** (old label=Food insecurity with hunger): reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. ***This level is the most severe of food insecurity.***

In reviewing the most recent, comprehensive USDA report entitled “Household Food Security in the United States in 2020,” there is no breakdown available of Native American/American Indian demographics; the populations are lumped into Other, non-Hispanic.<sup>vii</sup> The most recent Native specific USDA report is “Measuring Access to Healthful, Affordable Food in American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Areas” dated December 2014.<sup>viii</sup>

“Disparities in food insecurity are a result of the structural racism originating with colonization and continuing to the present. Historical traumas have impacted traditional foodways, or the connection between culture, community, and the production and consumption of food. These traumas include the loss of food sovereignty from the forced relocation of AIAN people from ancestral lands, forced cultural assimilation policies, disrupted land management and fractionation, Tribal termination and land privatization, and the substitution of Native culturally appropriate foods with commodity foods. Barriers to obtaining Native traditional food include permits limiting access to hunting, discriminatory farm-lending practices, fishing or farming and degradation of the environment, while barriers to buying healthy food include the lack of transportation and the higher cost of food in Tribal areas. Access to preparing healthy food is limited in those areas lacking electricity or running water.”<sup>ix</sup>

### **Elderly – Hunger and Aging**

- Food insecurity persists among our elderly. Underlying contributors to many of the nutrition-related difficulties that elders face include frailty and poor health, exacerbating medical conditions, increasing disability, and extended hospital stays.
- “Food insecure seniors have limitations in activities of daily living” and the effect “is roughly equivalent to being fourteen years older.”<sup>x</sup>
- Nearly one in six seniors in America faces the threat of hunger or malnourishment (around 8 million total).<sup>xi</sup>
  - The rate of hunger among older adults increased 65 percent from 2007 to 2014.
  - One-third of all seniors report trimming the size of their meals, skipping meals completely or buying less nutritious foods because they didn’t have enough money for a proper meal.
  - Senior hunger costs the U.S. healthcare system \$130 billion per year.

### **Children -- Implications of Hunger**

- “Not having enough healthy food can have serious implications for a child’s physical and mental health, academic achievement and future economic prosperity. Research shows an association between food insecurity and delayed developmental in young children; and behavioral problems like hyperactivity, anxiety and aggression in school age children.”<sup>xii</sup>
- “This research has found that food insecurity is associated with increased risks of some birth defects, anemia, lower nutrient intakes, cognitive problems, and aggression and anxiety. It is also associated with higher risks of being hospitalized and poorer general health and with having asthma, behavioral problems, depression, suicide ideation, and worse oral health.”<sup>xiii</sup>
- “Both mild and moderate-to-severe food insecurity are associated with an increase in needing support or being at-risk in each of the four school readiness domains, particularly Self-Regulation and Social Emotional Development. Furthermore, while nearly half of the children in food-secure households are on-track across all four school readiness domains, only one in four children experiencing moderate to severe household food insecurity are on-track across all domains. Conclusions: Household food insecurity is associated with reductions in school readiness among preschool-aged children.”<sup>xiv</sup>

### ***Early Childhood Caries – Prevalence of caries in children 3-5 years old:***<sup>xv</sup>

- “When compared to other racial or ethnic groups, AI/AN children aged 3 to 5 years have more than double the number of decayed teeth and nearly twice the overall dental caries experience than the next highest ethnic group, Hispanics (Mexican Americans), and almost three times that of White children. For AI/AN children aged 6 to 9 years, 80% have a history of dental caries compared with only 45% of the general U.S. population, and almost half of AI/AN children have untreated dental caries compared to just 17% of the general U.S. population in this age group.”

### *Growth*

- Malnutrition can affect children in several ways, including stunted growth (if this happens before the age of three, the damage can be reversed with treatment. But after that, it's irreversible) and, in case of sudden and severe lack of food, wasting.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Hunger may flatten the normal curve of growth, with more children being underweight or overweight.
- Hungry children can be overweight, underweight, or normal weight.

### **Obesity Trends - AIAN**<sup>xvii</sup>

- The U.S. obesity rate increased to 42% in 2017-2018.<sup>xviii</sup> In addition, “the 2020 Adult Obesity Prevalence Maps show that 16 states now have an adult obesity prevalence at or above 35%.”<sup>xix</sup>
- **American Indian/ Alaska Native** adolescents are 30 percent more likely than non-Hispanic white adolescents to be obese. American Indian or Alaska Native adults are 50 percent more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic whites.
- **People** who are overweight are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, high levels of blood fats, diabetes, and LDL cholesterol – all risk factors for heart disease and stroke.
- **Food insecurity** increases the risk for obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer—conditions highly prevalent among American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). (Excerpt from Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition, Volume 12, 2017, Issue 1)<sup>xx</sup>
- High fat, high calorie foods increase satiety (the feeling of fullness) and are often eaten when there is not enough money to buy food.

### **SNAP Trends - National**<sup>xxi</sup>

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp program), Characteristics of SNAP Households, FY 2019 National:

- SNAP participants rose to an average 45.2M people per month in the second half of 2020 (April-September 2020), a 14% increase from 37.3M in the first half (October 2019 to March 2020).<sup>xxii</sup>
- Forty-three percent of SNAP participants were children. Thirty-two percent of SNAP participants were nondisabled, non-elderly adults. Sixteen percent of participants were age 60 or older, and 10 percent were non-elderly adults with disabilities.
- The percentage of households with elderly individuals has increased by more than 10 percentage points over the last 25 years. As the percentage of households with elderly individuals has increased, income from Social Security became the most prevalent type of household income in FY2019. Thirty-one percent of SNAP households received income from Social Security in FY 2019.

### **Access to Food**

- **Hunger During Pandemic:** As reported in the Covid Research Report from the Food Research and Action Center, “Although only 28 counties have a majority of AIAN people, 18 of those counties were projected to be in the top 10 percent of counties with the highest food insecurity rates of 2020. ...There is evidence that COVID-19 has affected access to healthy foods. During shelter-in-place mandates, AIAN people residing on reservations shopped more frequently in local convenience stores than supermarkets, which have a broader array of healthy foods but are further away.”<sup>xxiii</sup>
- A recent Feeding America report cites that 23.5 percent of Native American households were food insecure during the coronavirus pandemic and projected 1 in 6 children (all races) would be food insecure in 2021.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- 54% of Native American respondents could not afford to eat balanced meals sometimes or often during Covid, and more than a third ate less than they should because they did not have enough money for food.<sup>xxv</sup>

- Key findings from “Reimagining Hunger Responses in Times of Crisis: Insights from Case Examples and a Survey of Native Communities’ Food Access During COVID-19<sup>xxvi</sup>
  - 48% indicated that sometimes or often during the pandemic the food their household bought just didn’t last, and they didn’t have money to get more.
  - 37% of individuals indicated that in at least one month during the coronavirus pandemic, they or other adults in their household cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn’t enough money for food.
  - 34% of individuals indicated that they ate less than they felt they should because there wasn’t enough money for food.
  - Food insecurity rates are statistically significantly higher for respondents with children under age 18 in their household.
- There are just 13 grocery stores on the Navajo reservation straddling Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, the largest in the U.S. at 27,000 square miles — bigger than West Virginia. <sup>xxvii</sup>
- 51% of respondents indicated that they travel to Off-Nation stores to purchase groceries in border towns like Gallup and Farmington, NM. Sixty five percent (65%) of participants noted that they traveled to off-nation towns to purchase groceries from the stores that they visit second most often. <sup>xxviii</sup>
- Nearly all foods tend to cost more on the reservations. On average, compared to nationwide rates, a gallon of milk costs 44 cents more on the reservation. A loaf of bread costs 66 cents more, a pound of ground beef or apples 84 cents more, tomatoes a pound of tomatoes 63 cents more, a pound of coffee \$1.83 more. In comparison, a bag of Cheetos averages 63 cents than the national rate. <sup>xxix</sup>  
Which would you choose?

### **Availability of Resources-Food Banks**

- In addition to elevated unemployment and poor health, food supply chain disruptions and rising food prices contributed to decreased access to food for Native communities during COVID-19 and exacerbated the already higher food prices on Tribal lands. <sup>xxx</sup>
- “A new nationally representative survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults by Consumer Reports finds that about 1 in 5 American grocery shoppers (19 percent) have used a food pantry, food bank, or community food distribution at some point since the pandemic began. What's more, about half of them said they didn’t use these food programs in the year leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S.” <sup>xxxi</sup>
  - “This situation is more devastating than the 2008 financial crisis,” says Brian Ronholm, Consumer Reports’ director of food policy. “When you factor in the economic crisis caused by the pandemic and combine it with the food-supply disruptions that have occurred, it’s created almost a perfect storm for food insecurity.”

<sup>i</sup> [https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief\\_3.9.2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_0.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://blog.nativepartnership.org/food-and-water-a-basic-human-right-but-not-an-equal-opportunity/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/food-insecurity-and-food-insufficiency-assessing-causes-and-historical-trends/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/food-insecurity-and-food-insufficiency-assessing-causes-and-historical-trends/#:~:text=As%20expected%2C%20those%20with%20lower%20income%20are%20more,earning%20185%20percent%20or%20more%20of%20the%20FPL.>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=100417>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=8590.1>

<sup>viii</sup> [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43905/49690\\_eib131\\_errata.pdf](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43905/49690_eib131_errata.pdf)

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