



2019 STATUS REPORT on Hunger in Rhode Island

Cuts to SNAP Will Leave More People Hungry

MAJOR FINDINGS

- ★ Low-income Rhode Islanders experience a significant meal gap with over 11 million meals missed each year.
- ★ Hunger is linked to serious and costly health problems.
- ★ Demand for food assistance remains high at member agencies of the Food Bank as families struggle to afford basic household expenses.
- ★ Senior adults and families with children will lose SNAP benefits under Trump administration proposals, increasing their food insecurity.



Low-Income Rhode Islanders Are Missing 11 Million Meals

The economy is strong, with low unemployment, but there are still thousands of Rhode Islanders who cannot afford three healthy meals a day.

172,000 Rhode Islanders live in households with incomes below the level of poverty that qualifies children for free school meals (130 percent of the federal poverty level).¹ For everyone living in these households to have three meals per day, 188.3 million meals are needed in a year.

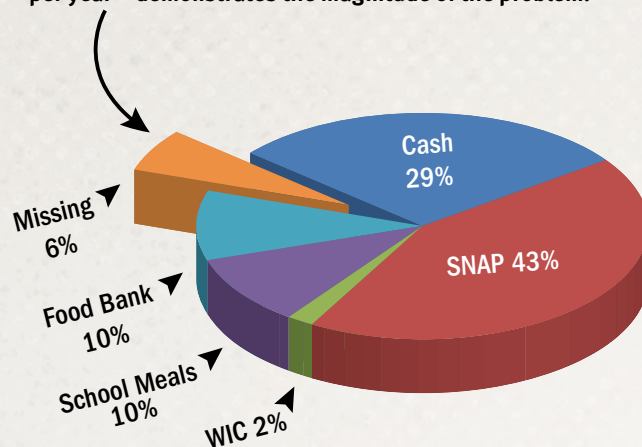
Source of Meals

Source of Meals	Meals in Millions
Purchased w/cash ²	55.2M
SNAP benefits ³	80.3M
WIC benefits ⁴	3.1M
School Meals ⁵	18.7M
Food Bank & Member Agencies ⁶	19.7M
Total Meals Provided	177M
Total Meals Needed	188.3M
Missing Meals	11.3M

Most low-income households use their own earnings along with government benefits, including SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), to purchase food. All schools offer children from low-income households free breakfast and lunch

Sources of Meals for Low-Income Rhode Islanders

The number of missing meals in Rhode Island – 11.3 million per year – demonstrates the magnitude of the problem.



meals. Many families also rely on member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank for food assistance.

In total, these sources account for 177 million meals, leaving a gap of 11.3 million meals per year. Even after utilizing government nutrition programs and charitable food assistance, 6 percent of meals are missed by low-income households in Rhode Island.



The Food Bank's statewide network of member agencies serves 53,000 people EACH MONTH

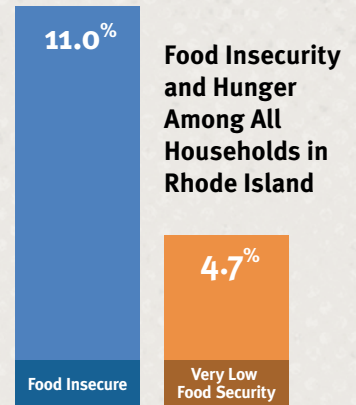
At High Risk for Hunger

Many families in Rhode Island lack enough food to meet their nutritional needs. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), approximately 48,000 Rhode Island households (11% of all households) are food insecure, meaning their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money or other resources.

Nearly half of food insecure households in Rhode Island report the most severe conditions associated with hunger – what the USDA calls “very low food security.”⁷

Demand for Food Assistance Remains High

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank currently serves 53,000 people each month through its statewide network of 168 member agencies. Demand at food pantries and meal programs is higher than it was ten years ago during the Great Recession.



Low-Income Rhode Islanders Face Significant Hardships

In 2019, the Food Bank conducted the Rhode Island Hunger Survey in collaboration with the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at Brown University. The survey found that the Food Bank serves some of the most vulnerable households in Rhode Island. One of the most significant findings was:

At food pantries, households with children or senior adults make up two-thirds of those served.

Nearly all households surveyed (88%) live below the federal poverty level (annual income below \$21,330 for a family of three).⁸ At this level of income,

households struggle to afford necessities and make difficult decisions about which bills to pay.

Among households with children, **69% include an adult who was employed in the last year, yet:**

- 51% chose between paying the utility bill or buying food
- 46% chose between paying rent or buying food
- 31% chose between paying for health care or buying food

Hunger is a Health Issue

The survey found that the health of people receiving food assistance is frequently compromised.

- 45 percent rate their health status as fair or poor
- 41 percent have a household member with diabetes
- 60 percent have a household member with high blood pressure

By comparison, 9 percent of Americans have Type 2 diabetes and 32 percent have high blood pressure.⁹

The results of the survey are consistent with a growing body of evidence connecting food insecurity to health outcomes and health care spending. Besides poor health, there are economic consequences. **Health care costs associated with food insecurity equal \$160 million per year in Rhode Island.**¹⁰



Federal Nutrition Programs are the Largest Source of Meals for Low-Income Households



Federal nutrition programs — SNAP, WIC, School Breakfast and School Lunch — provide the majority of meals for low-income households in Rhode Island.

Cuts to SNAP will leave 11,000 Rhode Islanders, including 5,000 children, without food assistance.

Proposed Cuts to SNAP

Approximately 149,000 Rhode Islanders are enrolled in SNAP,¹¹ a critical resource for low-income families. But benefits are modest. The average household benefit in Rhode Island is just **\$223 per month**. Many SNAP recipients exhaust their benefits before the end of the month and turn to food pantries for assistance.

The Trump administration is proposing several policy changes to SNAP that will limit eligibility and reduce benefits. If enacted, 11,000 people would lose SNAP benefits in Rhode Island, including 5,000 children.¹² Many will seek food assistance at pantries and meal sites.

Switch to Electronic WIC Benefits Helps Families

45,993

**Individuals
Eligible and
Enrolled in WIC**

21,209

Eligible

Enrolled

WIC provides individualized support and funds for the purchase of nutritious foods to low-income pregnant women, new mothers and their children up to age five. There are 21,200 participants in Rhode Island, but only 46 percent of eligible households are participating.¹³

One reason for the low participation rate among eligible families is that WIC requires frequent office visits. Families with young children have difficulty getting to WIC offices on public transportation. This year, Rhode Island is introducing eWIC, which substitutes an EBT card for vouchers and replaces some office visits with online courses. eWIC will also make it easier to shop and pay at the register.¹⁴

Breakfast After the Bell Feeds More Kids

The school breakfast program is an effective and proven way to close the meal gap. But at many schools in Rhode Island, breakfast is served before school begins, creating an obstacle for students. In other states where school breakfast is served after the start of the school day, participation rates climb to 70 percent.

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) is encouraging schools to adopt new service models for breakfast, including breakfast in the classroom at elementary schools, and “grab and go” programs at the secondary school level.¹⁵ Last year, the Governor proposed “No Student Hungry” legislation that would require all schools in high-poverty districts to provide “breakfast after the bell,” but the legislation was not approved by the General Assembly.

52,700

**Rhode Island
Students
Participating in
School Lunch
and Breakfast**

27,670

School
Lunch

School
Breakfast

Rhode Island is ranked 34th in the country for School Breakfast participation.¹⁶

Summary

The strong economy improved incomes and earnings for many Rhode Islanders, but not all. Those left behind are the most vulnerable with the fewest resources.

Low-income families, even those with adults working full-time, struggle to afford basic household expenses, suffer from poor health, and miss meals because they can't afford adequate food. In numbers higher than during the Great Recession, they turn to food pantries and meal programs for help.



Closing the meal gap in Rhode Island will require a significant investment in federal nutrition programs and the Food Bank. Rather than cutting SNAP benefits, the USDA should increase benefit levels to match the real cost of food. At the state level, Rhode Island should make a concerted effort to end child hunger by promoting WIC and offering breakfast as part of the school day to students in high-poverty districts. The state should also increase funding for the Food Bank to guarantee food assistance for every family in need.

Endnotes

1. **2017 American Community Survey**, U.S. Census Bureau.
2. **2017 Consumer Expenditure Survey**, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. On average, low-income individuals spent \$2,582 per year (\$49.65 per week) to purchase food. This means that \$447 million was spent on food by low-income Rhode Islanders, including \$259 million in SNAP benefits, \$10 million in WIC benefits, and \$178 million in cash. In market research, Nielsen found that the average cost of a meal in Rhode Island is \$3.23, so this population purchased 55.2 million meals with cash.
3. **FY2018 SNAP Monthly State Participating and Benefit Summary**, USDA. Rhode Island received \$259 million in SNAP benefits last year. Based on a cost per meal of \$3.23, SNAP benefits purchased 80.3 million meals.
4. **WIC Program: Food Cost, FY2018**, USDA. Rhode Island received \$10 million in WIC benefits. Given a cost per meal of \$3.23, WIC benefits purchased 3.1 million meals.
5. **Child Nutrition, FY2018 State Level Tables, Total Lunches Served; Total Breakfasts Served**, USDA.
6. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank requires member agencies to report the number of meals provided monthly. In the twelve-month period, July 2018 to June 2019, 19 million meals were provided by these agencies across the state.
7. Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M., Gregory, C. and Singh, A, **Household Food Security in the United States in 2018**, Economic Research Service, 2019.
8. **2019 Poverty Guidelines**, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
9. **National Diabetes Statistical Report; High Blood Pressure Fact Sheet**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019.
10. Berkowitz, S., Basu, S., Gundersen, C. and Seligman, H., **State-Level and County-Level Estimates of Health Care Costs Associated with Food Insecurity**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019.
11. **SNAP: State Level Participation and Benefits**, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2019.
12. **Letter to the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service**, Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2019.
13. **Women and Children Participating in WIC**, 2019 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook.
14. **WIC Report**, Rhode Island Department of Health.
15. **Child Nutrition Programs Report**, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019.
16. **School Breakfast Scorecard, School Year 2017-2018**, Food Research and Action Center, 2019.



RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK

OUR MISSION

To improve the quality of life for all Rhode Islanders by advancing solutions to the problem of hunger.

OUR VISION

We envision a state where no one goes hungry.



- ★ **Submit comments at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) telling the USDA that the proposal to cut SNAP benefits would increase food insecurity and hunger in Rhode Island.**
- ★ **Urge the Rhode Island Department of Health at health.ri.gov/contact to conduct a statewide campaign to promote eWIC and boost WIC enrollment among families with young children.**
- ★ **Contact your state representative to advocate for legislation requiring high-poverty school districts in Rhode Island to provide "breakfast after the bell" to increase School Breakfast participation.**
- ★ **Contact the Governor at governor.ri.gov demanding an increase to state funding for the Food Bank to ensure that food pantries and meal programs can serve everyone in need.**

Rhode Island Community Food Bank

200 Niantic Avenue
Providence, RI 02907

Phone: (401) 942-6325

Fax: (401) 942-2328

🏠 rifoodbank.org

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