



## Map the Meal Gap

### Food Insecurity, Poverty, and Charitable Food Assistance: What's the Difference?

At Feeding America, our mission is to feed America's hungry through a nationwide network of member food banks and engage our country in the fight to end hunger. Although we seek to meet the needs of food-insecure individuals and families, it is not always easy to identify the need for food within our communities. We have been using *state* and *national* level USDA food-insecurity data within the network for some time (e.g. "41 million Americans are at risk of hunger"), but for many years we had to use poverty as our best indicator of the need for food at the *local* level. More recently, the *Map the Meal Gap* analysis has enabled us to look at food insecurity by county and food bank service area. This data can be reviewed along with local poverty levels and local Hunger Study data to enhance the picture of need in a community, but there are key differences between these three sources of information.

#### Key Terms

**Food Insecurity** refers to the [USDA's measurement](#) of lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members; limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate food.

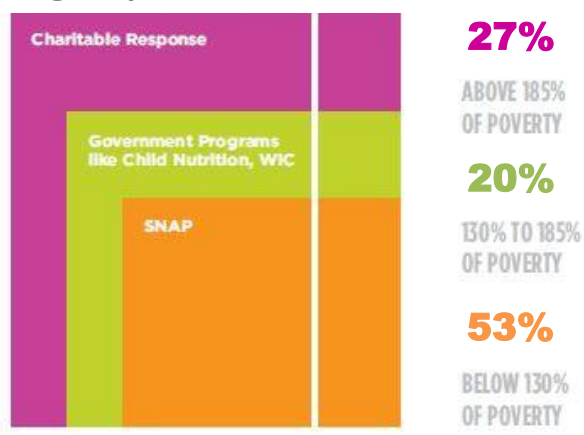
**Poverty** refers to a lack of economic resources. The [Census Bureau](#) establishes a set of poverty thresholds annually (varying by family size), based on the Consumer Price Index and determines poverty rates through several major household surveys and programs.

**Charitable Food Users** are people served by the Feeding America Network, whose characteristics are explored in the [Hunger in America](#) study. This information does not factor in the many individuals served at non-charitable locations, such as Kids Cafes programs or Senior Centers.

#### What's the Difference?

Chart 1

#### Food-Insecure Individuals and Income Eligibility, 2016<sup>1</sup>



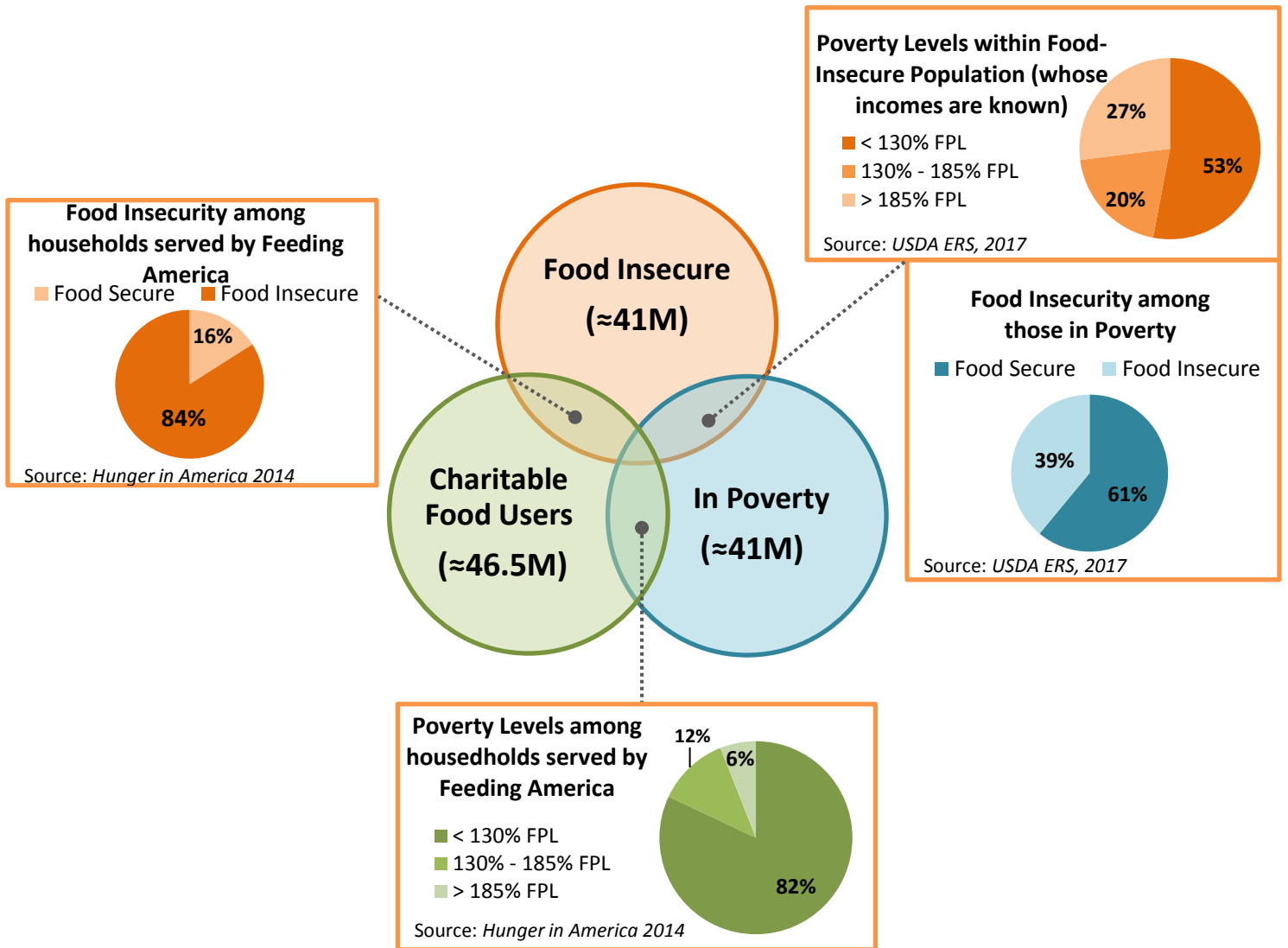
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research

Although related, food insecurity and poverty are not the same (see **Chart 1**). The [USDA](#) reports that nationally 27% of the food-insecure population<sup>1</sup> lives above 185% of the federal poverty line, and therefore may not qualify for federal nutrition assistance. Furthermore, we know from *Hunger in America 2014* that 16% of the households served by Feeding America identify themselves as food secure. Dr. Craig Gundersen, a member of Feeding America's [Technical Advisory Group](#) and lead researcher for the *Map the Meal Gap* study, notes that poverty is only one of many factors associated with food insecurity. In fact, higher unemployment, lower household assets, and certain demographic characteristics also lead to a lack of access to adequate, nutritious food.

<sup>1</sup> Of the food-insecure population whose income is known

## Figure 1: How do Food Insecurity, Poverty, and Charitable Food Assistance Overlap?

\*Note: Due to rounding, totals range from 99%-101%



**Figure 1** above provides a snapshot of how food insecurity, poverty, and charitable food assistance overlap. The charts indicate that poverty, food insecurity, and use of charitable food assistance are related but not equal. If food insecurity and poverty were the same, one might expect less variation of income among food-insecure people. Likewise, one might also expect to find higher rates of food insecurity among poor people, but the USDA indicates that most poor people (61% of those with incomes below 100% of the federal poverty line) are actually food secure.

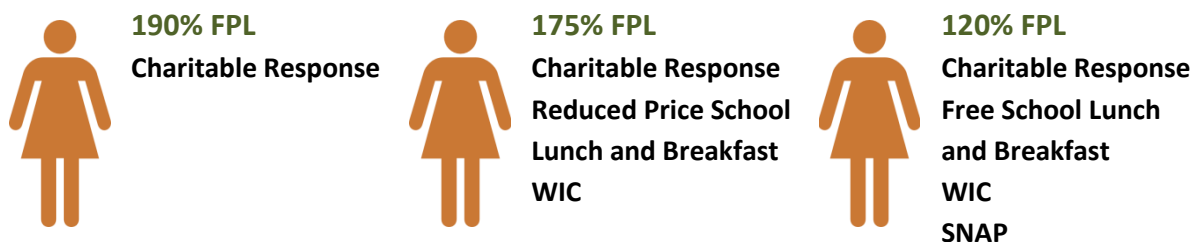
We can also see the need for additional information regarding the national need for food. There are no data currently available showing percentages of the total food-insecure and poor populations who are served or not served by the Feeding America network. Although individually useful, these separate sources (USDA, U.S. Census Bureau, and *Hunger in America*) do not provide a complete picture of national hunger.

## Why Might These Differences Exist?

There are a number of factors that may contribute to hunger in any given community and which illustrate the differences between poverty, food insecurity, and charitable food users:

- **Poverty Measurement:** The **official income measurement** used to determine poverty status does not include benefits, such as SNAP or WIC. While a family may be poor, as determined by income, they may have access to these benefit programs which help prevent food insecurity. This family would be living in poverty, but may not be food insecure.
- **Poverty Thresholds:** A family of four with income above \$32,000 per year is above 130% of the federal poverty line (FPL), but in high-cost areas, this may barely be sufficient to cover housing costs. Thus, the family may not be living in poverty, but may need to supplement with food from the food bank. This family could be food insecure, even if they are not officially living in poverty.
- **Unemployment:** Unemployment is a major driver of food insecurity, but often represents a recent situation. As a result, a newly unemployed person may not possess coping strategies for dealing with food needs, such as applying for SNAP or visiting food pantries. Additionally, they may have standing expenses (e.g. rent, car payment, etc.) that are no longer affordable without a steady paycheck. This person's previously earned income may put them above the poverty threshold, while their current employment status affects their food security and their usage of charitable food providers.
- **Tradeoffs:** Some families prioritize food over other necessities in order to remain food secure, despite living in poverty or using other forms of assistance. Feeding America's *In Short Supply* study found that one in three low-income Americans struggles to afford basic non-food household goods, such as personal hygiene or cleaning products. While 80 percent of these families classify as food insecure, one in five families unable to afford household necessities classifies as food secure.
- **Access:** Food insecurity may also result when food is available but inaccessible due to location or other constraints, such as limited physical functioning by seniors or those with disabilities.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** People with lower incomes are also more likely to be eligible for food assistance programs. Imagine a pregnant mother of a 6-year-old in a household hovering at 190% FPL. There is a possibility she would be *less food secure* than a similar woman in a household with income at 175% FPL because the second woman may be eligible for government assistance. The mother at 190% FPL might even be less food secure than a mother at 120% of FPL. See **Figure 2** below for hypothetical examples of program eligibility based on household income level.

**Figure 2:** Possible scenarios of program eligibility based on household income level



Measuring need based on poverty alone provides an incomplete illustration of need for food within our communities. *Map the Meal Gap* addresses some of these information gaps by recognizing food insecurity as the most precise measure of hunger available at the local level. More accurate, local assessments of need assist in strategic planning for Feeding America and our network partners to continue the journey of ending hunger through a quantifiable and data-driven approach.