

Rural Hunger in Inland Northwest Second Harvest

Individuals and families living in rural areas frequently face hunger and food insecurity at higher rates. There are many factors that contribute to this trend in communities; many are a result of the unique challenges living in remote area causes. Some of these challenges include an increased probability of food deserts, absence of job opportunities, low-wage incomes and higher rates of unemployment. Rural counties make up 63 percent of all United States counties, but also account for 76 percent of counties with high food insecurity rates that rank in the top 10 percent of all counties. According to Feeding America, 2.8 million rural households face hunger.

Second Harvest feeds hungry people in 26 counties in Eastern Washington and North Idaho – a mostly rural service territory that spans 51,000 square miles in the Inland Northwest. Twenty-threeⁱ of these counties are considered to be rural. In fact, 45 percent of all food distributed by Second Harvest goes to rural counties and that percentage continues to increase. That amounted to 12.6 million pounds of food given to rural areas last year. Specifically, 49 percent of all produce and 46 percent of perishable products are distributed to the rural counties within the Inland Northwest. Last year, Franklin and Yakima counties were distributed the most food. These two counties alone account for 40 percent of the rural food distributed by Second Harvest.

According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap 2017, the rural counties in the Inland Northwest with the highest food insecurity rates are Whitman at 19.9 percent, Ferry County at 18 percent, Pend Oreille County at 17.1 percent, and Shoshone County at 17.6 percent. All of these counties face significantly higher food insecurity rates than Washington state (12.8 percent) and nationally (13.4 percent). In Eastern Washington, 97,750 people are food insecure. These counties account for 10 percent of all food insecure people in Washington. Within North Idaho, 11,930 people are food insecure. All told, that's 109,680 food insecure people and within the rural counties that Second Harvest serves.

Children are particularly more likely to face hunger in rural counties. The child food insecurity rates in rural counties are notably high. One in five children lack consistent access to food. Pend Oreille County has a child food insecurity rate of 27.5 percent and Stevens has a rate of 25.5 percent. One in three children in Pend Oreille County faces regular food shortages at home. The rural counties have over 50,000 food insecure children. According to No Kid Hungry (national nonprofit that works to end child hunger in America) research shows that children who do not receive proper nutrition are more likely to struggle in school, suffer from increased health issues and are less likely to finish high school or earn a college degree. These children will grow into adults who are less likely to earn a livable wage and continue the cycle of poverty and hunger. Childhood hunger also heightens the risk of making impulsive decisions that can lead to early pregnancy, incarceration and other life-altering events. This is why it is of the utmost importance to address hunger early in life. Cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) further increase the number of people at risk of hunger.

Farming and agriculture is a trend among rural America. Small-scale farmers can often times be the heart of these rural counties. Without many other high-paying jobs available, this tends to be the most common way to earn a living. But even with high rates of sales of agriculture products, the residents within these counties are not seeing the return. Oftentimes these counties are left with high unemployment rates and poverty levels further contributing to the increase rates of food insecurity.

The correlation between unemployment, poverty and food insecurity rate is undeniable. Studies performed by the USDA found that as the unemployment rate increases, so does the rate of food insecurity or specifically “an increase of 1 percentage point in the unemployment rate (measured as the highest monthly unemployment rate in the past calendar year) was associated with an increase of 0.5 percentage point in the prevalence of food insecurity.” USDA and Feeding America both report that living below the poverty line is a noteworthy risk factor for dealing with food insecurity. A USDA study reports that food insecurity “was strongly associated with household income and employment. For example, households with incomes 1.5 times the poverty line were about 6 percentage points less likely to be food insecure than households with incomes at half the poverty line.” The poverty levels in a majority of the Inland Northwest rural counties are staggeringly higher than the national (13.5 percent) average. The range of poverty levels is Chelan County at the lowest of 12.7 percent and Shoshone County at the highest of 21.1 percent. Unemployment rates in these counties are also high with the lowest being 4.8 percent at Whitman County and the highest being 11.5 percent in Ferry County. The national unemployment rate is only 4.3 percent. The heightened levels of unemployment and poverty in the rural counties increase the struggles for residents.

When families feel the effects of an employment or economic downturn they must turn to local and federal resources for assistance. When food is provided to those in need it provides much desirable relief, so their effort can be put towards longer term goals, rather than solely worrying about when their next meal will be for themselves or their child. The problem of distributing food is amplified in rural areas. Since these locations can be difficult to reach and stationary food banks could be hours away, there is dependency on mobile food banks to supply these rural areas with food. And with the lower population density, a range of businesses and services simply cannot thrive in the area. This means that residents of these rural communities are left to commute many miles for work, grocery stores, access medical care and other essential needs.

Second Harvest supplies 55,000 hungry people with food each week in both rural and urban counties. Second Harvest’s Mobile Market fills pockets of unmet needs in rural areas. The Mobile Market brings fresh produce and other groceries to high-need areas. For a couple of hours, volunteers distribute the food to people in need. This is just one of the many services that Second Harvest provides to combat hunger in the Inland Northwest. Without this access, many people and families would be left to go hungry.

Table 1.1

County	Food Insecurity Rate	Number of food insecure individuals	Child Food Insecurity Rate	Number of food insecure children
Adams	5.3%	1,000	18.8%	1,270
Asotin	14.0%	3,080	21.7%	1,010
Chelan	9.5%	7,080	18.4%	3,340
Columbia	14.3%	570	22.6%	170
Douglas	8.9%	3,520	20.1%	2,120
Ferry	18.0%	1,380	26.8%	380
Franklin	6.7%	5,820	20.1%	5,810
Garfield	13.7%	310	21.2%	100
Grant	9.4%	8,680	19.8%	5,520
Kittias	16.3%	6,870	20.4%	1,550
Klickitat	13.3%	2,760	23.0%	1,000
Lincoln	13.4%	1,390	22.3%	510
Okanogan	13.5%	5,570	23.4%	2,260
Pend Oreille	17.1%	2,220	27.5%	740
Skamania	14.0%	1,580	20.8%	490
Stevens	16.0%	6,970	25.5%	2,500
Walla Walla	12.1%	7,200	20.5%	2,680
Whitman	19.9%	9,320	20.8%	1,460
Yakima	9.1%	22,430	21.7%	16,120
Benewah	16.6%	1,510	21.2%	430
Bonner	15.9%	6,530	19.9%	1,690
Boundary	15.3%	1,680	18.7%	480
Shoshone	17.6%	2,210	22.3%	560

Data gathered through Feeding Americas Map the Meal Gap (2017)

ⁱ **Washington:** Adams, Asotin, Chelan, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Franklin, Garfield, Grant, Kittias, Klickitat, Lincoln, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, Skamania, Stevens, Walla Walla, Whitman, Yakima
Idaho: Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, Shoshone