

Food Insecurity In Hampton Roads



FOOD INSECURITY IN HAMPTON ROADS

I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

– Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2018, more than 1 in 10 households in Hampton Roads experienced “food insecurity,” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).¹ This meant that more than 180,000 people in our region did not have access to adequate food and in many cases did not know from whence their next meal was coming. Food insecurity negatively influences a host of outcomes. For workers, it lowers productivity. For students, it lowers academic performance and for young children, it leads to overall poor health. This is a surprising, perhaps astonishing, circumstance given that our region’s economy was growing in 2018, and the regional rate of unemployment fell from 8.2% in January 2010 to only 3.2% in December 2018. Yet food insecurity persisted.

Food insecurity is highly sensitive to the business cycle. Graph 1 reveals that as economic conditions improve, food insecurity declines. As the national unemployment rate declined from an average of 14.5% in 2010 to 3.9% in 2018, food insecurity declined from 14.5% to 11.1% of households. Yet, even though a record number of Americans were working, food insecurity remained persistent for more than 1 in 10 households.

Improving prosperity, by itself, is insufficient to eliminate food insecurity. Food insecurity is higher among single-parent families, families with more children and among the elderly than the general population. Over 44% of disabled households were food insecure.² Food insecurity was higher on average for Black and African American and Hispanic households than white or Asian households. There is, unfortunately, no single policy or remedy for food insecurity.

Because food insecurity has multiple causes that ebb and flow, it can be episodic for individual households. A person may be employed this year but was not last year. A husband leaves a household for six months but then returns. Homegrown garden vegetables are available in the summer and fall but not in the winter. It is also important we note that when food insecurity data are collected, it is done on the basis of households. This means that many homeless families and individuals are excluded. Consequently, the USDA’s published food insecurity data are biased downward and underestimate the true extent of food insecurity in the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession clearly exacerbated food insecurity in Hampton Roads, Virginia and across the United States. Food banks reported record levels of need. The lines of cars snaking around parking lots in hopes of receiving food served as a reminder of how food insecurity can strike any household due to a job loss or medical crisis.

In this chapter, we examine food insecurity in Hampton Roads. We discuss how public programs and regional food banks are working to address this problem in the region. We conclude by asking what can be done to alleviate food insecurity in Hampton Roads.

¹ Each month, the U.S. Census Bureau conducts the Current Population Survey for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This survey of 50,000 households provides monthly data that are used to determine measures such as the size of the civilian labor force and the unemployment rate. Once a year, the Census Bureau asks about 130 million households to complete a supplemental survey about food security, food expenditures and the use of food and nutritional assistance programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s annual reports on household food security are derived from responses to the supplemental survey.

² Computed using data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement data, 2018, www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-security-inthe-united-states.

Food Insecurity, Hunger And Poverty: A Primer

Food insecurity and hunger are terms often used interchangeably in conjunction with the concept of poverty. While these terms are related to one another, they also create some confusion. To mitigate the confusion, in 2006, the USDA changed its definition to make an explicit distinction between food insecurity and hunger.

Every individual has experienced some form of hunger at some point. Hunger is the physical and mental manifestation of sensations associated with not eating a sufficient amount of food. A person can be hungry for numerous reasons, from skipping a meal because they are busy, to not having enough money to purchase food. For our purposes, we focus on hunger that arises from not having a reliable, consistent source of food.

The USDA currently defines food insecurity as “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” Feeding America, a nonprofit advocacy group, describes food insecurity as “a household’s inability to provide enough food for every person to live an active, healthy life.” Both of these definitions relate food insecurity to the underlying problem of a household’s lack of nutritious food. Feeding America’s definition goes beyond the sustenance of food and evokes the quality of life that comes from having an adequate supply of nutritious food.

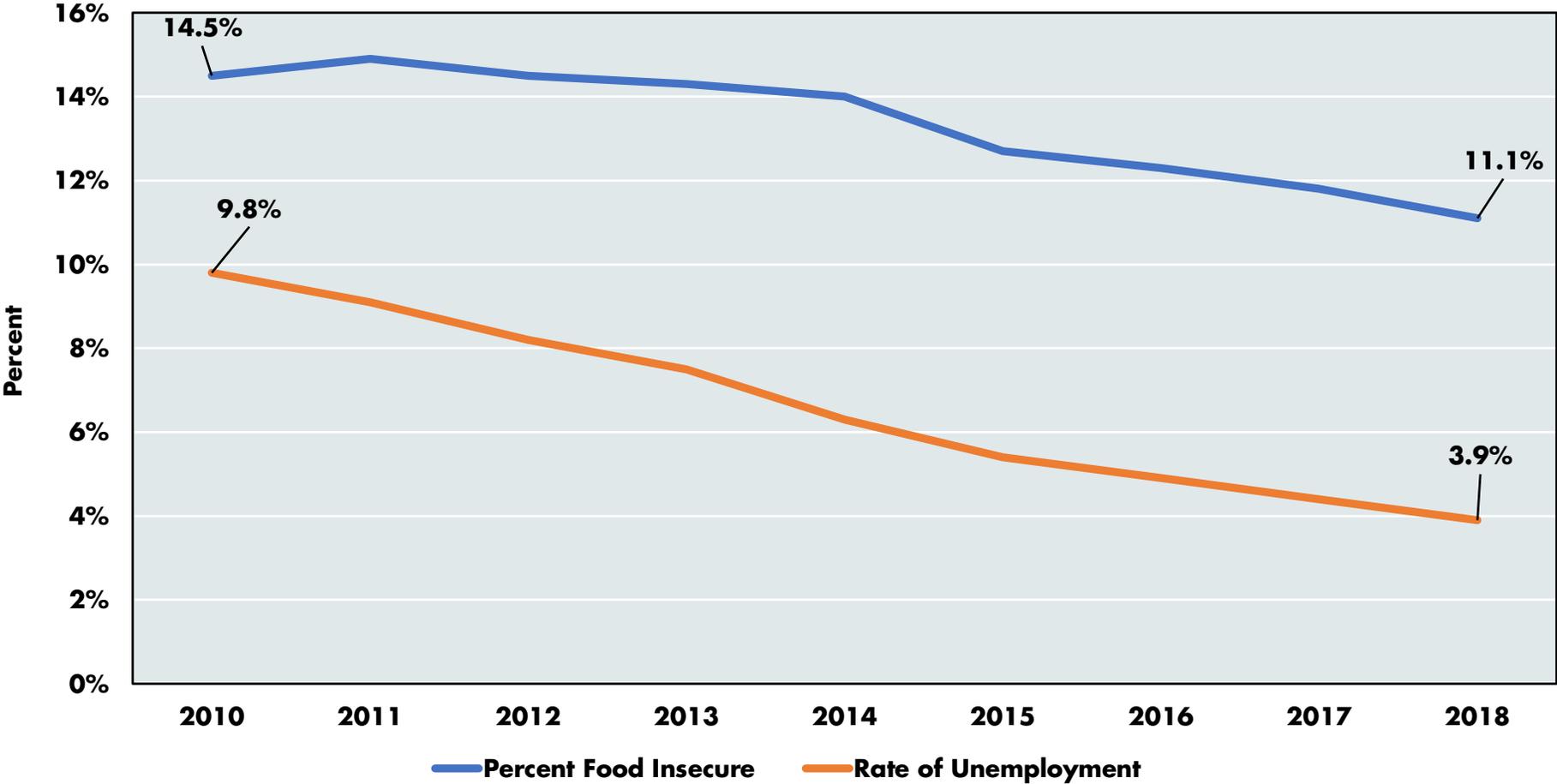
The USDA works with the U.S. Census Bureau to measure food insecurity. Once a year, the Census Bureau asks the households in its monthly Current Population Survey to complete a supplemental survey about food security, food expenditures and the use of food and nutritional assistance programs. In 2018, for example, the supplemental survey covered 37,300 households and formed a representative sample of about 130 million U.S. households. The USDA’s annual reports on household food security are derived from responses to the supplemental survey.

Michael* has been a client of the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore. Like many food-insecure Americans, Michael has been a member of the “working poor.” He is a single parent and food is one of his family’s largest expenses, especially in the summer when his children do not have access to school breakfast and lunch programs. He has worked multiple jobs to raise his family’s income and well-being, but his industrious behavior sharply reduced the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other benefits he receives because his income exceeds program rules. This underlines a difficulty most income-based social safety net programs encounter – finding the right formula to diminish benefits when recipients earn income, but in a way that does not discourage recipients from work. SNAP has yet to devise income-based rules for support that do not discourage some recipients from gainful employment.³



³ <https://foodbankonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Foodbank-Public-Report-9-26-19-online.pdf>. (*name changed)

GRAPH 1
FOOD INSECURITY AND THE HEADLINE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE:
UNITED STATES, 2010-2018



Sources: Alicia Coleman-Jensen et al., "Household Food Security in the United States in 2018," U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Labor Statistics

Food Insecurity In Hampton Roads

The cities in Hampton Roads tend to exhibit the highest rates of food insecurity, led by Franklin at 14.6% in 2018 (Table 1). Food insecurity is highly correlated with median household income, the unemployment rate and, consequently, the poverty rate. Cities with higher concentrations of poverty have higher rates of food insecurity. According to the U.S. Census, for example, the poverty rate in Chesapeake is 8.5% compared to 19.7% in Norfolk. It should be no surprise that food insecurity is higher in Norfolk (13.9%) than Chesapeake (8.5%). Once again, this emphasizes the primarily economic roots of food insecurity.

Food insecurity rates for children always exceed those for the populations as a whole and typically are about 1.5 times larger in a typical jurisdiction. Why? Because the addition of individuals to a household frequently strains the resources of that household. Further, if a single parent leads the household, this complicates the problem. Numerically, children are the greatest victims of food insecurity in the United States.

The roots of food insecurity are no mystery. Adverse economic conditions and poverty are usually the major contributors. Food insecurity rises side by side with unemployment rates. That said, there are other factors that contribute to food insecurity. Several recent State of the Region reports have documented the fall in labor force participation rates – both nationally and in Hampton Roads. Some portion of this decline can be ascribed to changing societal attitudes toward work. In some quarters, it has become socially acceptable for an individual not to be fully employed even when that person is of prime working age. The consequences of this are not all negative, but one unfortunate outcome is family economic distress that leads to food insecurity for individuals (often children) who did not make this decision for themselves.



TABLE 1

FOOD INSECURITY IN HAMPTON ROADS, 2018

Locality	Number of Food-Insecure Individuals	Food Insecurity Rate	Number of Food-Insecure Children	Food Insecurity Rate for Children
Camden County	1,220	11.7%	460	18.6%
Chesapeake	20,100	8.5%	7,040	12.2%
Currituck County	2,930	11.4%	930	16.3%
Franklin	1,200	14.6%	350	17.6%
Gates County	1,640	14.2%	520	21.5%
Gloucester County	3,400	9.1%	980	13.1%
Hampton	17,590	13.0%	5,160	17.9%
Isle of Wight County	3,420	9.4%	1,030	13.4%
James City County	5,860	7.9%	1,700	11.2%
Mathews County	820	9.3%	190	14.6%
Newport News	23,800	13.2%	7,030	16.8%
Norfolk	34,190	13.9%	8,910	18.3%
Poquoson	740	6.2%	240	8.9%
Portsmouth	13,100	13.7%	4,340	19.3%
Southampton County	1,800	10.0%	500	14.5%
Suffolk	8,760	9.8%	2,950	13.4%
Virginia Beach	36,740	8.2%	10,770	10.7%
Williamsburg	1,760	11.9%	210	12.8%
York County	4,750	7.0%	1,490	9.2%
Hampton Roads	183,820	10.7%	54,800	14.8%

Source: C. Gundersen, A. Dewey, E. Engelhard, M. Strayer and L. Lapinski, "Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018," Feeding America, 2020

Federal Government Responses To Food Insecurity

The U.S. government has responded to emerging food insecurity and hunger problems in a variety of ways, but three programs stand out: (1) SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, often referred to as “food stamps”; (2) WIC, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; and (3) NSLP, the National School Lunch Program. We will consider each of these in turn.

How large are these programs? If we measure size by dollars spent, then SNAP easily is the largest at approximately \$57 billion annually.⁴ As Graph 2 indicates, SNAP accounts for about two-thirds of all federal spending directed at food insecurity. SNAP, WIC and NSLP together account for 87.4% of federal spending in this arena.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP provides benefits to supplement food budgets for low-income individuals and families so that they can purchase healthy food with the goal of moving toward self-sufficiency. The program has moved from its early food stamp days, when eligible households received a book of stamps, to an EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) card that is loaded each month and works like a debit card. The program varies by state and allows eligible families to apply for benefits for a certification period; however, after the certification period ends, they must recertify. The amount a household can receive is determined by income and family size. In fiscal year 2020, a two-person household can receive a maximum of \$355 per month, while maximum benefits for a household of five increase to \$768 per month.⁵

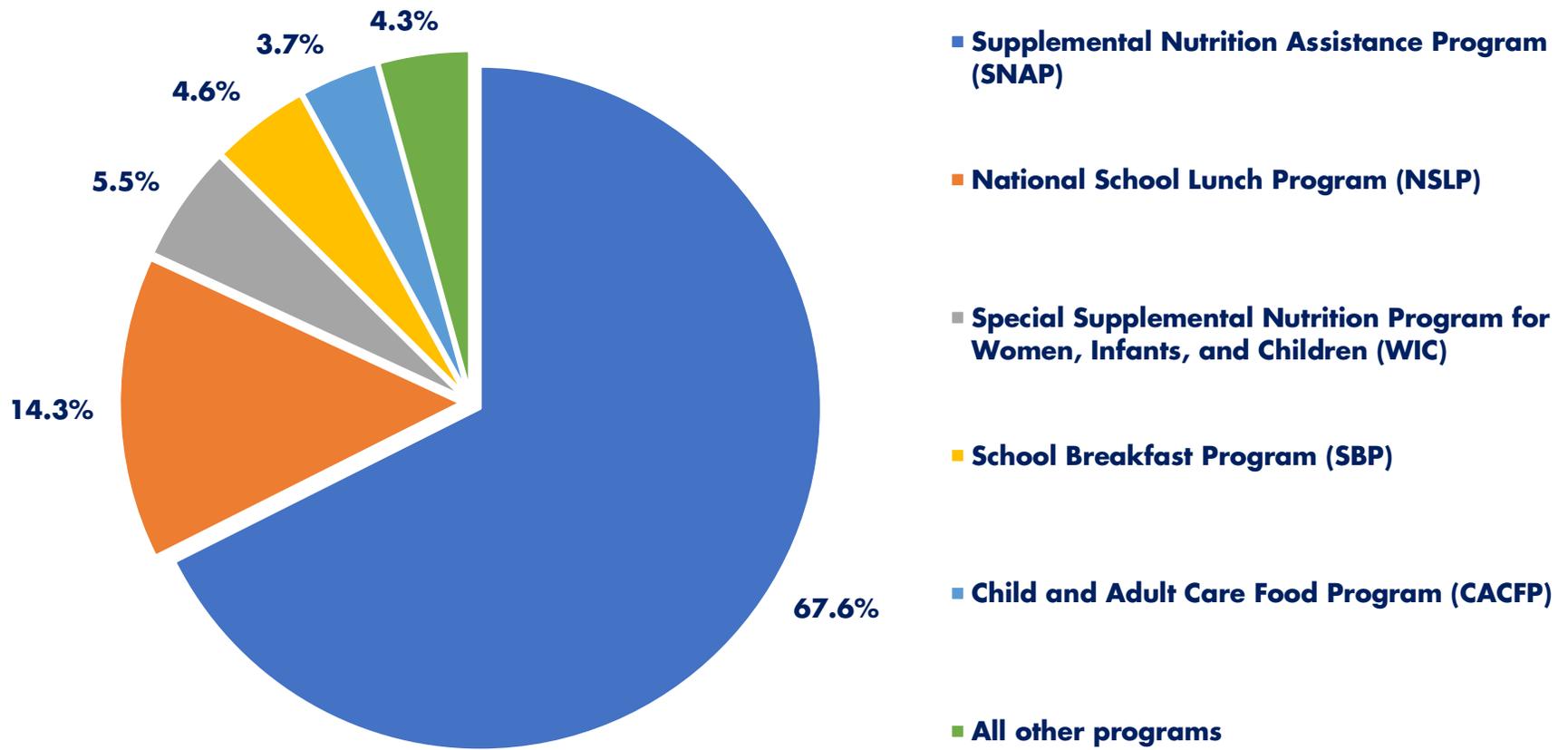
In 2019, an average of 1 in 10 persons in the Virginia portion of Hampton Roads received SNAP benefits monthly (Table 2). SNAP participation rates varied considerably, from a low of 2.4% of the population in Poquoson to a high of 27.2% in Franklin. Residents received almost \$260 million in SNAP benefits in 2019, a figure that is certain to rise with the COVID-19 recession in 2020.

⁴ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/BRVA51M647NCEN>.

⁵ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>.

GRAPH 2

FEDERAL SPENDING TO COMBAT FOOD INSECURITY, FY 2018



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-security-in-the-united-states

TABLE 2

**AVERAGE MONTHLY SNAP PARTICIPATION AND BENEFITS:
HAMPTON ROADS, 2019**

	2019 Population	Average Monthly SNAP Participation	Average Monthly SNAP Benefits Paid	Average SNAP Benefit Per Person	Average Monthly SNAP Participation Rate
Chesapeake	244,835	18,093	\$2,256,606	\$124.72	7.4%
Franklin	7,967	2,170	\$274,031	\$126.30	27.2%
Gloucester County	37,348	3,072	\$366,111	\$119.20	8.2%
Hampton	134,510	18,331	\$2,259,112	\$123.24	13.6%
Isle of Wight County	37,109	2,880	\$331,854	\$115.22	7.8%
James City County	76,523	3,541	\$422,516	\$119.33	4.6%
Mathews County	8,834	671	\$73,366	\$109.42	7.6%
Newport News	179,225	28,823	\$3,621,462	\$125.64	16.1%
Norfolk	242,742	35,428	\$4,395,990	\$124.08	14.6%
Poquoson	12,271	300	\$38,581	\$128.71	2.4%
Portsmouth	94,398	19,778	\$2,572,358	\$130.06	21.0%
Southampton County	17,631	2,199	\$251,909	\$114.58	12.5%
Suffolk	92,108	10,221	\$1,204,987	\$117.90	11.1%
Virginia Beach	449,974	26,063	\$3,203,564	\$122.91	5.8%
Williamsburg	14,954	1,049	\$131,247	\$125.10	7.0%
York County	68,280	2,101	\$250,399	\$119.21	3.1%
Hampton Roads	1,718,709	174,717	\$21,654,093	\$123.94	10.2%

Sources: 2019 Population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau and SNAP participation and benefits data from the Virginia Department of Social Services

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

The WIC program was created in the early 1970s and is widely recognized as a safeguard for low-income women and children who are nutritionally at risk. Specifically, WIC provides resources for low-income pregnant women, postpartum mothers, infants and children up to age 5. These vulnerable groups receive nutritious foods, nutrition education and counseling, along with referrals for health care and social services. WIC is a federally funded program but is operated through local clinics by state WIC agencies.

Applicants for WIC resources must demonstrate a need. Eligible participants must have a household income below 185% of the federal poverty line or are deemed income-eligible based on participation in other federal programs. Furthermore, WIC participants must demonstrate nutritional risk (for example, anemia, weight loss, etc.) in an assessment conducted by a health care professional.

WIC food packages are the program's primary means of nutritional support. Similar to SNAP, WIC participants use an EBT card to shop at authorized grocery stores and other WIC-approved vendors. WIC-approved food, including a wide range of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, is designated with a blue WIC sign in many grocery stores. The program guarantees participants specific amounts of certain foods, such as a dozen eggs and 36 ounces of approved breakfast cereal a month. On the other hand, for certain items, such as fruits and vegetables, there is a maximum dollar value that the program covers. WIC covers \$11 worth of fruit and vegetables a month for pregnant women.⁶

⁶ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/wic-food-packages>.

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The USDA partners with state agencies to provide the NSLP. The nation's second-largest food and nutrition assistance program, it affords every student the opportunity to receive a healthy lunch, serving on average 30 million children a day, with over 90% of all schools participating. Children are eligible for either a free or reduced-price lunch based on their household income relative to the national poverty line. In addition to receiving meals during the school year, students in low-income areas are able to eat meals during the summer from the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), also known as the Summer Meals Program. Also administered by the USDA, this program is federally funded and reimburses providers that serve meals to children and teens during the summer.⁷

In the 2019–2020 school year, 47.1% of students in Hampton Roads schools were eligible for free or reduced-price meals at school (Table 3). In York County, about 1 in 4 students were eligible for free or reduced-priced meals. In Newport News, Norfolk and Portsmouth, approximately 3 in 4 students were eligible. In the city of Franklin, every enrolled student was eligible. The closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic created a new model of food distribution to students in March 2020. To combat this sudden bout of food insecurity, public school systems across the region offered “grab and go” breakfast, lunch and, at selected schools, dinner on weekdays and weekends to students at a variety of school locations, as well as some mobile sites in the lowest-income areas. In accordance with the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, emergency waivers were granted allowing parents and/or guardians to pick up meals for their children from school, without the student needing to be present. The Virginia Department of Education also implemented the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), a temporary food benefit offered to families whose children would have received free or reduced-price meals had schools not been closed. The P-EBT benefits are issued in a lump sum and are available wherever SNAP benefits are accepted.

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, SFSP, 2020.

TABLE 3**STUDENT NUTRITION PROGRAM MEMBERSHIP AND FREE/REDUCED-PRICE MEALS FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS:
HAMPTON ROADS PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 2019-2020**

School District	Student Nutritional Program Membership	Free Meal Eligible Students	Reduced Price Eligible Students	Total Free and Reduced Price Students	Percentage of Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals
Chesapeake	40,423	14,164	2,114	16,278	40.3%
Franklin	1,090	1,090	0	1,090	100.0%
Gloucester County	5,212	1,688	399	2,087	40.0%
Hampton	19,726	11,230	729	11,959	60.6%
Isle of Wight County	5,664	1,751	212	1,963	34.7%
Mathews County	996	376	78	454	45.6%
Newport News	28,468	21,763	0	21,763	76.5%
Norfolk	30,302	20,960	1,248	22,208	73.3%
Poquoson	2,124	299	44	343	16.2%
Portsmouth	14,077	10,461	386	10,847	77.1%
Southampton County	2,750	1,128	99	1,227	44.6%
Suffolk	14,377	6,523	615	7,138	49.7%
Virginia Beach	68,772	21,513	5,675	27,188	39.5%
Williamsburg-James City County	11,863	3,293	614	3,907	32.9%
York County	13,151	2,052	990	3,042	23.1%
Total	258,995	118,291	13,203	131,494	47.1%

Source: Virginia Department of Education, Office of School Nutritional Programs, 2019-2020 Free and Reduced Eligibility Report, June 2020

Filling In The Gap: Nonprofit Food Assistance Programs

Programs administered by the federal government serve as the first line of defense in the fight against food insecurity. However, local food assistance from the nonprofit sector provides a valuable additional layer to the nutritional safety net that is less rigid and can more easily accommodate individual or household circumstances. An eclectic combination of churches, mosques, synagogues, halfway houses, emergency shelters and other private organizations feeds the needy. Among the most active are Union Mission Ministries, The Salvation Army and Samaritan House. In Newport News, for example, Menchville House, Peninsula Rescue Mission and PORT Shelter feed and provide refuge for many dozens of individuals on a continuing basis.

Two of the largest organizations in Hampton Roads are the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore (founded in 1981) and the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank (established in 1986). The service areas of these two agencies divide up Hampton Roads roughly between the north and south sides of the region.⁸

These organizations partner with local city outreach programs to help food-insecure adults, families and children. Table 4 shows the variety of programs that each food bank offers. For example, the Food Rescue Program collects perishable food from over 150 area grocery stores, restaurants, caterers and discount retailers. The program salvages the food before it spoils and distributes it to those in the community without any requirements for assistance. On the other hand, the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank's SHARE program is an example of food assistance open to everyone. Participants must simply do two hours of volunteer service in their community to obtain nutritious food packages at a discounted price.

Table 5 provides some details on programs offered by both agencies. The Backpack Program seeks to augment the federal NSLP by providing food-

insecure children with bags or backpacks filled with food that they take home on weekends. The program relies on school personnel to identify children in need and distribute food discreetly to children before the weekend to minimize stigma. This program delivered more than 530,000 nutritious meals to children in Hampton Roads in 2019. In contrast, the mobile pantries distribute fresh, healthy food directly into the communities. These pantries distributed 3.2 million pounds of food in 2019. This program helps individuals and families access food when traveling is difficult, or when their local food bank is at capacity.

Breaking down the revenues of each Hampton Roads food bank illustrates the source of food aid in the region (Table 6). While both local food banks have fundraisers and food drives to collect resources, they rely primarily on receiving food donations from larger corporations. Donated food makes up over 75% of the revenues for each agency. The top food donors for the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank are AAFES Dan Daniels Distribution, Aldi, BJ's Wholesale Club, Costco Wholesale Corp. and Earth Fare, while the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore's top food donors are Food Lion, Sam's Club, the Virginia Department of Agriculture, Walmart and Aldi.

With such a large proportion of revenue coming from donated food, both food banks rely on heavily on volunteers. According to the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank, volunteers there devoted 32,908 hours during the 2018-2019 fiscal year helping members of their community.

⁸ The Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore serves Norfolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Suffolk, Franklin, Southampton County, Northampton County, Accomack County, Sussex County and Isle of Wight County. The Virginia Peninsula Foodbank serves Newport News, Hampton, Williamsburg, Poquoson, York County, James City County, Gloucester County, Mathews County and Surry County.

TABLE 4

PROGRAMS OFFERED BY THE FOODBANK OF SOUTHEASTERN VIRGINIA AND THE EASTERN SHORE AND THE VIRGINIA PENINSULA FOODBANK

Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore	Shared Programs	Virginia Peninsula Foodbank
Healthy School Market Program	BackPack Program	SHARE Program
Healthy Food Pantry Program	Kids Cafe	Culinary Training Program
Foodbank Friday Distribution	USDA Commodities	ServSafe Food Handler Guide for Food Banking Training Program
Community Gardens	Mobile Pantry	
SNAP Application Assistance	Warehouse Distribution	
Plant-A-Row for the Hungry	Summer Food Service Program	
	Food Rescue Program	

Sources: Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore programs, found at <https://foodbankonline.org/what-we-do/food-programs/>, and Virginia Peninsula Food Bank programs, found at <http://hrfoodbank.org/programs/>, April 2020

TABLE 5

FOOD DISTRIBUTED AND MEALS PROVIDED BY FOOD BANKS IN HAMPTON ROADS

Program	Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore	Virginia Peninsula Foodbank
Mobile Pantry	1.4 million pounds of food distributed	1.8 million pounds of food distributed
BackPack Program	317,194 meals provided	213,428 meals provided

Sources: Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore, 2018-2019 Annual Report, and the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank, 2018-2019 Annual Report, April 2020. Fiscal year 2019 statistics for both food banks run July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019.

TABLE 6**SELECTED COMPONENTS OF REVENUE, FY 2019:
FOODBANK OF SOUTHEASTERN VIRGINIA AND THE EASTERN SHORE AND THE VIRGINIA PENINSULA FOODBANK**

Revenue Source	Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore	Virginia Peninsula Foodbank
Donated Food	\$24,490,202	\$16,125,728
Monetary Donations	\$ 4,290,983	\$ 1,962,469
Grants	\$ 1,621,737	\$ 939,636
Program Fees	\$ 210,033	\$ 601,141
United Way	\$223,651	\$ 221,676
Total*	\$ 32,198,295	\$ 20,289,404

Sources: Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore, 2018-2019 Annual Report, and the Virginia Peninsula Foodbank, 2018-2019 Annual Report, April 2020. Fiscal year 2019 statistics for both food banks run July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019. *Columns do not add to total due to omitted revenue sources. Full totals can be found in both annual reports.

The Role Of Race Cannot Be Ignored

How does race influence food insecurity among American households? As protests erupted after the death of George Floyd, the discussion of issues related to race has only increased in importance. Hampton Roads is certainly, by accident of history or demographics, not immune from such conversations.

An in-depth examination of how race and systemic racism influences food insecurity is beyond the scope of this report. However, Graph 3 illustrates that a significantly larger proportion of the Black and African American and Hispanic populations are food insecure relative to the white population. The proportion of Black or African American households that report very low food security is almost three times higher than the proportion of white households.

There are a number of economic reasons why Black or African American and Hispanic households are relatively more food insecure. Workers in these households, on average, earn lower wages, have shorter job tenures and have less vibrant career trajectories. On average, median household income and wealth is lower in these households, so they are more susceptible to economic shocks. The loss of a job, an unexpected medical expense or an arrest can tilt the odds against these economically fragile households.

Yet, one cannot readily dismiss the argument that some substantial portion of the observed economic deficits between Black and African American households and other racial or ethnic groups is due to racism. Discrimination lowers incomes and opportunities, which, in turn, increases the average level of food insecurity for Black or African American households. Working to reduce racism would alleviate the disproportionate burden of food insecurity from households of color. Eliminating racism and other forms of discrimination is not only morally right, but also necessary for a nation to achieve its true promise.

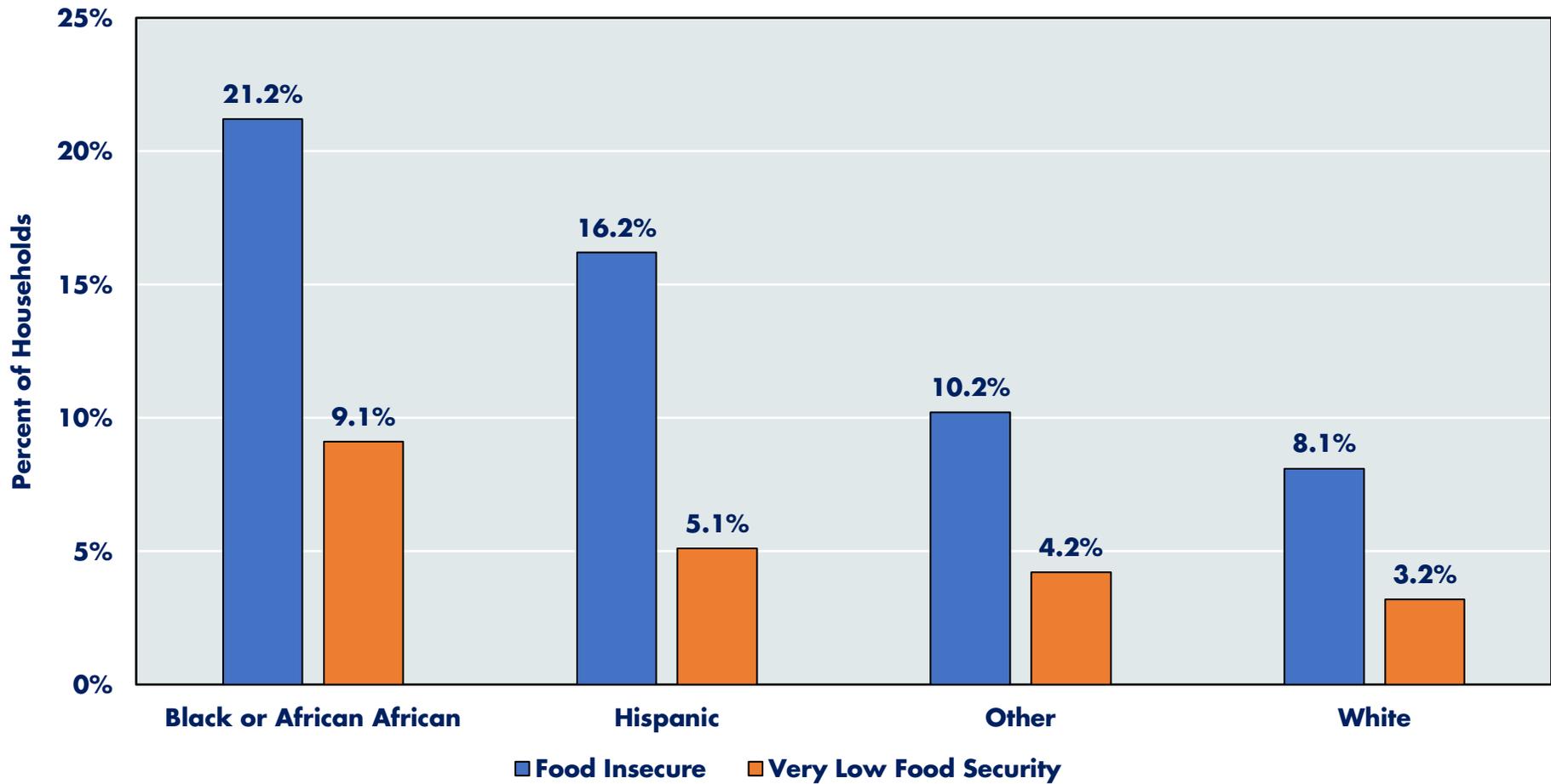
We also must note, however, that eliminating racism would not eliminate food insecurity. Why? As we have discussed previously in this chapter, reducing unemployment and improving incomes reduces food insecurity, to a point. Food insecurity is “sticky,” rapidly increasing in times of crisis and declining, to a point, in times of growth. We can, however, strive to ensure that all people are treated equally and justly so that our efforts to reduce food insecurity provide benefits to all households.

Although food insecurity does not discriminate by age or race and can become a reality experienced by anyone, African American and Latino individuals are disproportionately impacted in our region and throughout the nation by this complex social issue. These individuals often live in communities with a high concentration of poverty and racial minorities where access is limited to healthy food and other resources – such as health care, affordable housing, employment and workforce development – that can improve one’s quality of life and lead to economic self-sufficiency. The food insecurity disparities by race, in particular, illustrate persistent structural challenges throughout Hampton Roads. Fortunately, these challenges are not too great to overcome and comprehensive solutions are attainable. As long as enough people continue to care, together, we can solve hunger and address the root causes of food insecurity.

**– Ruth Jones Nichols, President and CEO
Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia and the Eastern Shore**

GRAPH 3

FOOD INSECURITY BY RACE: UNITED STATES, 2018



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the December 2018 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement. Hispanics may be of any race. www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-security-in-the-united-states

Final Thoughts

Food insecurity is not something that happens to “someone else.” One in 10 American households reported food-insecure conditions in 2018, and the most recent estimates for Hampton Roads suggest that 1 in 9 residents experienced food insecurity in 2017. Food insecurity disproportionately affects children, households led by women and households of color. The COVID-19 economic crisis has already impacted the demand for public and private food assistance services and, if history is any guide, the recovery from this recession will be slow.

Food insecurity is not a problem that only impacts individuals and families. It is also a public health crisis. Food insecurity has been associated with poor health outcomes for children and adults, and it should be factored into the larger conversation about how to maintain the overall health of a community. Food banks and nonprofits have served as front-line support during the pandemic. They have been agile and adapted to the growing demand. However, they need more support to continue to meet the needs of food-insecure households. The food banks are doing incredible work, but assistance is still needed from the local, state and federal governments to help families as our nation recovers from the pandemic.

What, then, can be done?

On a personal level, donate to a local food bank or organization that helps improve food security. Food banks are very efficient in turning monetary donations into food assistance. Simply put, the return on investment per dollar donated is relatively high. Donate time and allow employees to volunteer at a local food bank or similar organization while on the clock. The simple investment of time and resources multiplies the impact of food donations across Hampton Roads.

Invest in financial literacy. The research is clear: Households need tools to manage their resources. Improving financial literacy and management shifts the dynamic in a household from reacting to financial events to preparing for unforeseen circumstances. Improving financial literacy increases economic resiliency, which, in turn, can lower downstream demands on food banks and

public programs. However, the need for financial literacy is often realized after the fact; that is, only after one is in financial peril. We recommend incorporating financial literacy into middle school and high school curricula. If personal health is a core subject, then personal financial health also should be one.

Prioritize K-12 education. It should go without saying that a region without good schools is at a comparative disadvantage when trying to attract new investment and residents. Working to align schools with the needs of employers is only one part of the equation. It is important to recognize that schools play a key role in child nutrition and, in many cases, provide the only guaranteed meal for many children. Long-term investments in education not only improve employment outcomes for students, but also are a smart investment for businesses and leaders seeking to promote economic development. However, without strong nutritional programs, some students will go hungry and fail to achieve their full potential. Given the strong and clear linkages between student outcomes and food security, continued efforts to incorporate and improve food security throughout our school systems are not only laudable, but a necessity in times of economic uncertainty.

We live in challenging times. It is our choice whether to withdraw, to disengage, to fracture into smaller groups or to come together. Improving the lot of the least fortunate improves us all. It is high time we rise to this challenge.

