



# HUNGER IN THE U.S.



## A Problem Before the Pandemic. A Crisis Now.

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It is always good to keep this basic fact in mind when contemplating hunger: this country and this world produce more than enough food to feed everyone.<sup>1</sup> The problem of hunger is therefore a problem of distribution. It is also a problem of political will. We can end hunger if we cared to do so, here in the U.S. and around the world. We have the food and we have the financial ability. Unfortunately, the poor are invisible to too many, and they are often without much power to affect change. It is therefore up to each of us to join them in advocating for a community, a nation, and a world without hunger.

In this article, I will focus on the problem of hunger in the United States as a whole, as well as in the individual Gulf South states.

Before the pandemic, hunger was a problem even here, in our very wealthy country. In 2019, an estimated 10.5 percent of U.S. households—over 35 million people—were food insecure (that is, with limited or uncertain access to food) at some point during the year.<sup>2</sup>

Bread for the World, a Christian anti-hunger organization, provides data on each U.S. state and ranks them by their level of hunger.<sup>3</sup> The state they identified before the pandemic as having the greatest hunger problem was New Mexico, followed by Mississippi. Louisiana ranked third, Alabama seventh, Texas ninth, and Florida twenty-second.<sup>4</sup>

These states burdened by poverty—and the hunger that results—have populations that were very vulnerable when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Now, reports are showing that the economic fallout from the pandemic has led to significant increases in hunger.<sup>5</sup>

The Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, taken October 28 to November 9, 2020, found that 12 percent of adults were living in households that did not have enough to eat at some point during the previous seven days. The Pulse Survey indicated that number was 8.8 percent just prior to the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

The survey provides data broken down by state (and including Washington, D.C.).<sup>7</sup> Table 1 shows how the Gulf South states are doing in terms of food scarcity:

**Table 1 – Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey, October 28-November 9, 2020**

State	Percentage of adults reporting not having enough to eat in their household at some point in the previous 7 days.	Rank among the U.S. states
Mississippi	21.0%	#1
Louisiana	19.1%	#2
Alabama	16.8%	#5
Texas	14.5%	#11
Florida	13.8%	#15
U.S. average	12.0%	--

As can be seen in Table 1, food scarcity is a particular problem in the Gulf South states, especially in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Texas and Florida are also significantly above the national average.

Imagine, in Mississippi and Louisiana, about 1 in 5 households report not having enough to eat. It is also important to note that in these states and across the nation, households with children, in general, as well as Hispanic and Black families, in particular, have even higher rates of food scarcity.

Nationally, Black households are nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to struggle with food scarcity than white households.<sup>8</sup>

The main federal government program designed to help meet the food and nutrition needs of people is SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps). The number of people on SNAP has grown substantially since the onset of the pandemic. Increased need, together with greater flexibility and increased benefits established to meet this need, brought the number of SNAP beneficiaries from 36.9 million in February 2020, to more than 43 million by May.<sup>9</sup> More recent numbers have not been released, but they are likely to remain high and possibly increase due to the current economic conditions.

In addition to SNAP and some other government assistance, reports indicate that across the country in the summer and fall of 2020, there was a substantial increase in the usage of food pantries and soup kitchens, as individuals and families became desperate in these hard times.<sup>10</sup>

According to Katie Fitzgerald of Feeding America, the country’s leading hunger relief organization, “About 40 percent of the people who are showing up for food distributions have never before had to rely on charitable food assistance.”<sup>11</sup> Feeding America says demand for their services has increased 60% since the beginning of the pandemic last March.<sup>12</sup>

Many organizations are working to connect those in need with local resources. For example:

- FoodPantries.org hosts a national database of sources for free or subsidized groceries
- FoodFinder is a mobile and web app that helps find local food assistance programs
- WhyHunger.org hosts a national database of emergency food providers and support services

Perhaps the hero of our times in the effort to feed people in a time of disaster is chef José Andrés. His organization, World Central Kitchen, and their 2400 restaurant partners fed more than 30 million meals across some 350 U.S. cities during the first 6 months of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup>

Government food programs and private—including faith-based—charitable organizations are essential during this time of crisis. However, we need more than just emergency food. People need employment, substantial unemployment compensation, or other forms of income support to help carry them through the crisis. Another round of federal aid to help deal with the array of challenges that individuals, families, and small businesses are facing is also essential.

Beyond even that, however, we need to think of fundamental changes we can make to our society that lift people up and out of vulnerability and fear and into lives that are, in the long term, far more secure than they have been for years. We need universal health care, living wages, and far less income and wealth inequality. As Pope Francis tells us, “Inequality is the root of social ills.”<sup>14</sup> Building a society that at its foundation is more equal and just will make future crises like our current one far less catastrophic. In addition, such a society in better times will be one that will allow all of us to live lives of basic comfort and dignity.

## ENDNOTES

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## PROMISES - ENDNOTES

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The *JustSouth Quarterly* is published 4 times a year by the Jesuit Social Research Institute, College of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

The *JustSouth Monthly* is published 12 times a year and is available upon request without charge at [jsri@loyno.edu](mailto:jsri@loyno.edu). Copyright 2014 © Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X

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