

Food Insecurity in Southwest Virginia

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Purpose Statement

This policy brief will explore the intersectionality between food insecurity and socioeconomic status as well as the COVID-19 impacts, specifically focusing on Southwest Virginia (SWVA). The majority of the Southwest Virginia region is federally designated as rural, and has the highest food insecurity and lowest socioeconomic status in Virginia. Yet, data on food insecurity and its consequences in the region is limited. Thus, this policy brief will also highlight the seriousness and complexity of food insecurity in SWVA and the need for future research.

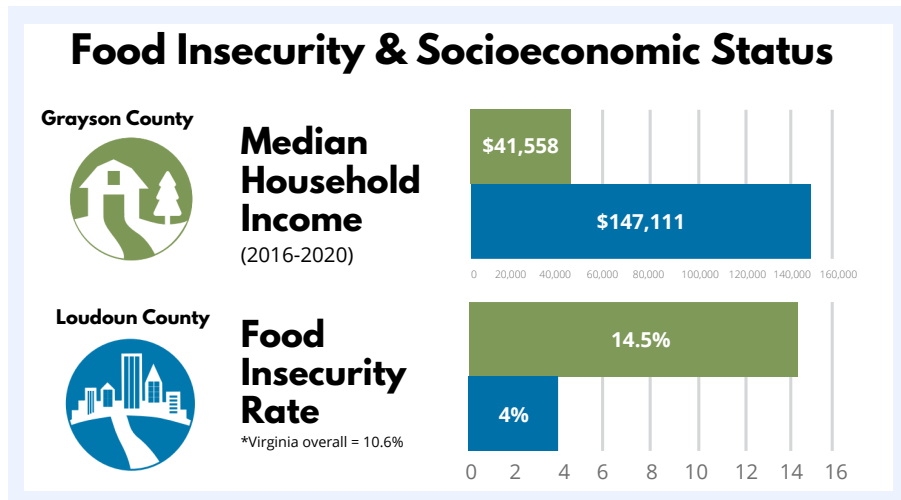
Background

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as, “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (USDA, 2021). Not having a sufficient and nutritious diet has a number of public health implications, both on the individual and community level. The correlation between food insecurity and chronic disease, like diabetes and hypertension, has been well established in scientific literature (Weaver & Fasel, 2018). In terms of oral health, the preexisting barriers that rural Americans face with accessing dental care is worsened by food insecurity, as it has been linked to poor dental health (Wiener et al., 2018). Food insecurity also has psychological effects which have been magnified by the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. A study found that food insecurity caused by the pandemic was associated with an increased risk of mental illness. The stress of not knowing where your next meal was

coming from made food insecure individuals three times more likely to develop mental illness than those suffering job loss, emphasizing the impact of food insecurity on all health dimensions (Fang et al., 2021). This risk was more than three times the risk of developing mental illness from job loss, emphasizing the severity of food insecurity and its health risks (Fang et al., 2021).

Food Insecurity and Socioeconomic Status

Virginia’s food insecurity rate is 10.6%, not far off from the national average of 10.5% (“Key Statistics,” 2020). The presence of food insecurity in Virginia is concentrated in certain areas of the state. The disproportionate low rates of food insecurity among certain regions of Virginia follow the same data trend that supports the relationship between low socioeconomic status and low rates of food security.



Typically, low-income areas have less access to healthier food options and have twice as many fast food restaurants than their affluent counterparts, meaning that low-income individuals have higher access to unhealthy and processed foods than fresh, nutritious options. Supermarkets are also sparse and the most common stores that most rural, low-income residents have access to are convenience stores (Paarlberg, 2013). In Scott and Grayson County, a significant portion of residents are up to ten miles away from a supermarket (“Go to the Atlas,” 2021). Specifically, Grayson County has a 43.11% residential coverage of food retailers, meaning only 43.11% of residential areas are a 10 minute drive away from a food retailer. For Bland County, this number is even lower at just 29.32% residential coverage for a 10 minute drive (County Residents’, 2019). The data supports the notion that SWVA faces many disadvantages when it comes to healthy food accessibility, thus affecting their overall food security and nutrition.

SNAP

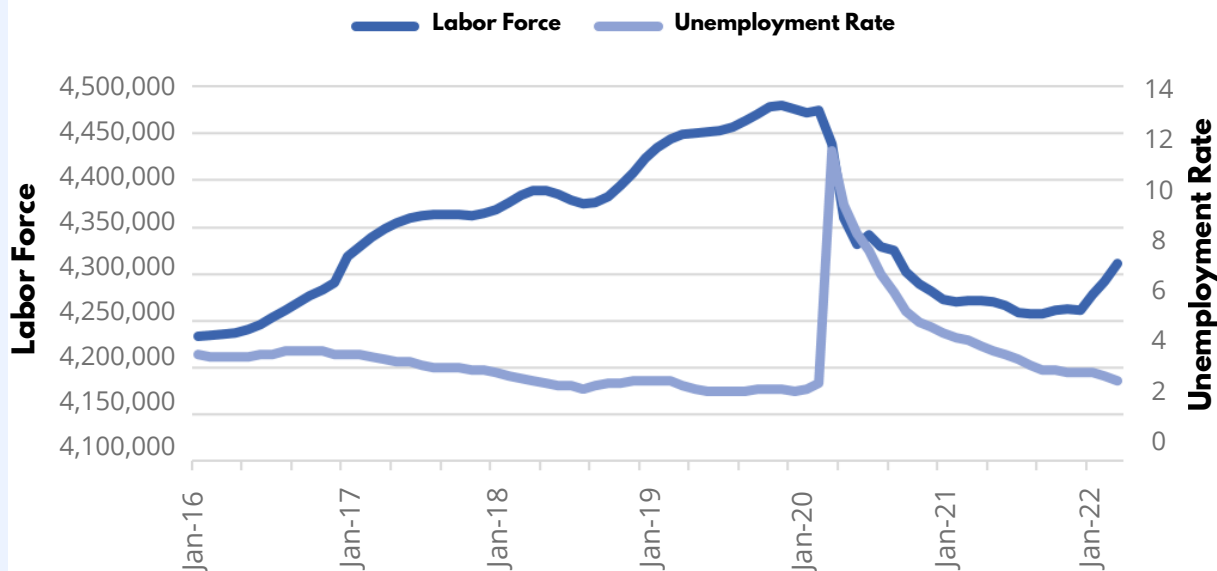
A common solution to addressing food insecurity has included the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The income eligibility for SNAP benefits is generally at or below 130% of the poverty line, and a majority of the Virginians receiving SNAP benefits are below the poverty line (“Virginia,” 2021). Between 9.3% to 81.2% of Virginia adults on SNAP reported being food insecure; for children, it is between 71.8% and 83.4%. Despite a large majority of SNAP recipients being food insecure, a study found that SNAP was not enough to alleviate the economic consequences caused by food insecurity due to its physical and cognitive implications (Sathe et al., 2021). Additionally, options for healthy food under SNAP are limited, such as in counties in SWVA. The county of Buchanan has 31 stores that accept SNAP, but only three of those stores sell meat, produce, and dairy (Scachetti, 2021).

COVID-19 Impacts

The preexisting impact of socioeconomic status on food insecurity was intensified by COVID-19 since many Americans lost their jobs, increasing the national poverty rate. Unemployment in the commonwealth of Virginia reached as high as 11.6% in 2020. Feeding America projected that food insecurity in rural areas may have been 14.4% in 2020 and 13.3% in 2021, compared to 12.5% in 2019 because of limited financial resources during the pandemic (Gundersen, 2021). The role of SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), during these times would seemingly be to assist individuals being affected by COVID-19 related job loss, but

research shows the opposite. According to a study, those who lost jobs during the pandemic had the weakest association with food assistance programs because of a lack of outreach to this group, showing the inaccessibility of government food assistance programs during the pandemic (Fang et al., 2022). The graph below shows how unemployment rates have been falling since 2020; however, the size of the labor force has also been decreasing, emphasizing the long-term effects that COVID-19 has on the difficulties of getting back into the workforce. With more individuals out of the labor force and unemployed, having the funds to maintain a sufficient diet remains a pressing issue even as unemployment rates fall.

Relationship of Labor Force & Unemployment Rate



The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively affected the food supply chain nationally, as there was a drastic shift in consumer demand and in Virginia, farmers struggled to keep up amidst changing their work environment to comply with pandemic guidelines. Virginia's agricultural industry has the largest economic impact of \$70 billion annually and more than 334,000 jobs provided in the commonwealth ("Agriculture Facts and Figures," n.d.). However, COVID-19 created a workforce shortage which resulted in the shutdown and limited capacity of meat and poultry plants with an unwavering consumer demand. Additionally, consumers preferred frozen and canned fruits and vegetables during the pandemic, so farmers had to quickly adjust their farming processes to match this, leading to a high amount of food waste. The stress that the pandemic has put on farmers and the overall food supply chain has resulted in nationwide food shortages that are still being observed today; further limiting the already scarce food supply for the food insecure.

Current Programs

Virginia Fresh Food Match

The Virginia Fresh Food Match (VFM) is a state program that works in partnership with SNAP, which doubles the SNAP purchasing power at farmers markets in an effort to support local farmers and increase the availability and affordability of fresh produce. A recent evaluation of the program found that VFM incentives were successful at increasing consumption of

fruits and vegetables in Virginia overall (Misyak et al., 2022).

Feeding Southwest Virginia

Feeding Southwest Virginia (FSWVA), a regional organization fighting hunger and fostering community partnerships, also distributes food throughout the region with their mobile food pantries and marketplaces, as well as a program called Food Farmacy. Food Farmacy gives the appropriate food to those with dietary-related illnesses to ensure that they are meeting their dietary needs to combat their health condition. FSWVA's mobile food pantries travel monthly to 12 distribution sites within some of the most underserved SWVA counties: Buchanan County, Carrol County, Craig County, Dickenson County, Grayson County, Lee County, Wise County, and Wythe County. Their mobile marketplace has two distribution centers who also accept SNAP benefits. Apart from FSWVA's work, community gardens have also been occurring in Blacksburg as a way to educate SWVA residents about healthy food habits and help reduce food insecurity (Carter, 2022).

Conclusion and Future Directions

- Economic Development: Economic investments to increase sites for potential supermarkets/grocery stores in underserved, rural regions like SWVA.
 - Incentives for local farmers to sell produce at local/regional farmers market and accept SNAP/WIC benefits to increase food accessibility for those receiving government assistance.
 - Additional funding for community based organizations, like Feeding SWVA, to maintain and enhance food access services.
 - Investment in upstream programs to break the cyclical generational poverty and educate youth on the importance of a balanced diet. Possibilities for interventions include after school educational programs to teach youth how to pick and prepare produce, backpack programs, and expanding community gardens.
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Virginia State Office of Rural Health

“*The Virginia State Office of Rural Health (VA-SORH) was established in 1991 to create, fund, and support quality and sustainable rural healthcare infrastructure throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. The VA-SORH is housed within the Virginia Department of Health, Office of Health Equity, and is the sole organization in Virginia that is federally designated to address and rectify health disparities affecting the state’s rural residents. The mission of the office is to partner with rural communities to identify opportunities and long-term solutions that ensure the health and prosperity of all Virginians. The VA-SORH fulfills this mission through providing technical assistance, regulatory updates, resources, and opportunities for collaboration with communities.*”



For more information, visit us online at: <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-equity/division-of-rural-health/> .

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