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Study shows hunger hitting closer to home

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A new study on hunger entitled "Map the Meal Gap" is the first study to identify the county-level distribution of over 50 million food-insecure Americans.

"Until now, we could only compare the data by state," said Craig Gundersen, University of Illinois associate professor of agricultural and consumer economics and executive director of the National Soybean Research Laboratory who led the data analysis on the project. "Having this data by county has the potential to redefine the way service providers and policy makers address areas of need."

Gundersen explained that the term "meal gap" refers to the additional number of meals the food insecure population in the selected area requires to meet their food needs. On the national level, the average cost of a meal is $2.54. The study shows this shortfall represents an estimated $21.3 billion on an annual basis.

"Per person this is only about $56 more each month on average to address the shortages in their food budget," Gundersen said.

Among the key findings of the study is that there are 44 counties in the United States that fall into the top 10 percent categories for both food insecurity and food prices. "These counties struggle with multiple stressors, including high food insecurity, high poverty, high unemployment and above-average food costs," Gundersen said. At the time the most recent data were collected, on average, one in every four persons in these counties was food insecure and 27 percent lived at or

below poverty. The counties are typically rural and one-third are majority African American.

This study also demonstrates the distribution of food-insecure persons who are not eligible for food assistance programs. In Illinois, for example, 41 percent of the almost 2 million people who are identified as being food insecure are also ineligible to receive federal assistance from SNAP, which is limited to people with incomes up to the 130 percent level of federal poverty. (SNAP, The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, was formerly known as the Food Stamp Program.)

A summary of the findings, an interactive map of the United States showing data for each county, and the full report are available on Feeding America's website at www.feedingamerica.org. The study was funded by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and the Nielsen Co.

The executive summary of the report features additional information that describes how Latinos and American Indians are disproportionately affected by high rates of hunger and high food prices.

Gundersen is also working with James Ziliak of the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research to coordinate a research program on childhood hunger with $5.5 million from the USDA.

"In order to address the problem of hunger in our communities, we have to understand it," Gundersen said. "The results from Map the Meal Gap will help researchers to better identify the populations and develop strategies to reach those who are most in need of food assistance."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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