

Addressing Food Insecurity: Introduction

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Introduction to Food Insecurity

Each year in Tennessee about 12 percent of people experience food insecurity at least one time (U. S. Department of Agriculture, 2020). Food insecurity is defined as having uncertain or limited access to sufficient food to meet the needs for all household members to maintain health and nutrition (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Financial constraints and proximity of affordable food sources are two leading causes of food insecurity.

Food security is measured across a spectrum that ranges from high food security to very low food security (Figure 1).

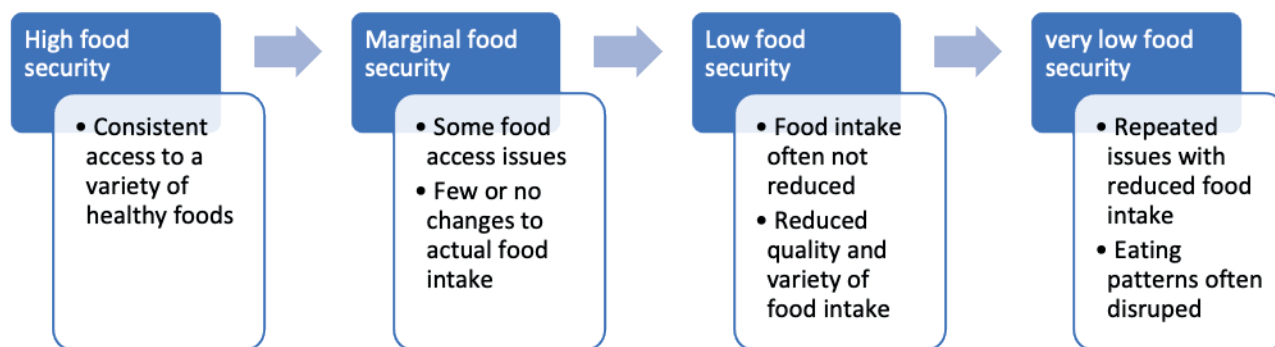


Figure 1. Spectrum of food security.

Who Is Affected?

Food insecurity does not affect everyone equally and some populations are particularly vulnerable. Race and gender can have significant impacts on whether someone has enough food. Household characteristics associated with high risk for food insecurity are income, employment, disability, adult educational levels, rural residency and household composition such as overall number of individuals and number of children (Leitz, 2018). Research indicates that households headed by women as well as households headed by Hispanic or African American individuals have higher than average rates of food insecurity including rates of very low food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). These disparities are tied to economic conditions that disproportionately affect these groups such as unemployment and low wages as well as historic policies such as redlining in mortgage lending and de facto neighborhood segregation. These generational disinvestment impacts live on today where certain neighborhoods are more likely to be classified as food deserts where residents lack access to healthy foods.

In addition, households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are more likely to report food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020), and women and children make up the majority of SNAP recipients. Both gender and class intersect as households headed by single women are more likely to be low-income and more likely to experience food insecurity. Recent research indicates that transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are more likely to experience food insecurity and less likely to seek services or receive assistance because of discrimination and fear of stigma (Russomanno et al., 2019).

It is important to recognize that the barriers to healthy eating are much higher and harder to overcome for certain populations.

Role of Extension

Since the 1970s, Extension has been addressing food insecurity through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. This program is a federal nutrition education program that was started as part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty. Extension also provides nutrition education through SNAP-Education, which in Tennessee is referred to as the Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program. There are four main facets of these programs: direct education, indirect education, social marketing, and policies, systems and environment (PSE) work. Most of the work is aimed at nutrition education including a series of lessons that are delivered by Extension county staff in an array of community sites including schools, senior centers, drug rehabilitation centers, women's shelters, and others. Indirect education includes staffing at farmers markets or health fairs where information about healthy eating, food safety, seasonal vegetables and more is distributed. Social marketing is supplementary marketing that utilizes print and social media to encourage healthy behaviors. PSE work targets changing systems and environments to promote access to healthy foods. Outcomes from these programs include increased consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables and fuller pantries with food resource management skills.

Addressing Food Insecurity Through a Systems-Lens

Food insecurity is a complex societal issue that goes beyond some people not having enough food to eat. Food insecurity impacts health, relationships and well-being and is interconnected with housing, employment and mental health. Research has found an association between food insecurity, adverse childhood experiences (ACES), and increased risks of anxiety, depression and obesity, with food insecurity also negatively affecting academic and social outcomes (Chilton et al., 2017; Shankar et al., 2017).

Each year UT Extension Family and Consumer Science agents and program assistants engage over 25,000 people in nutrition education programs, providing information about how to eat healthy on a budget. However, nutrition education is not enough if families do not have access to healthy food.

The socioecological model demonstrates the interconnections between individuals, families, communities and society (Figure 2). Extension agents and program assistants are in unique positions in their communities to bring together diverse stakeholders to address food security at different levels. Reinforcing direct education with environmental changes is a more effective way to make a difference.

Some of the most important work is PSE work. This systems level work takes into account that food insecurity isn't just individual choices or a lack of knowledge resulting in unhealthy diets.

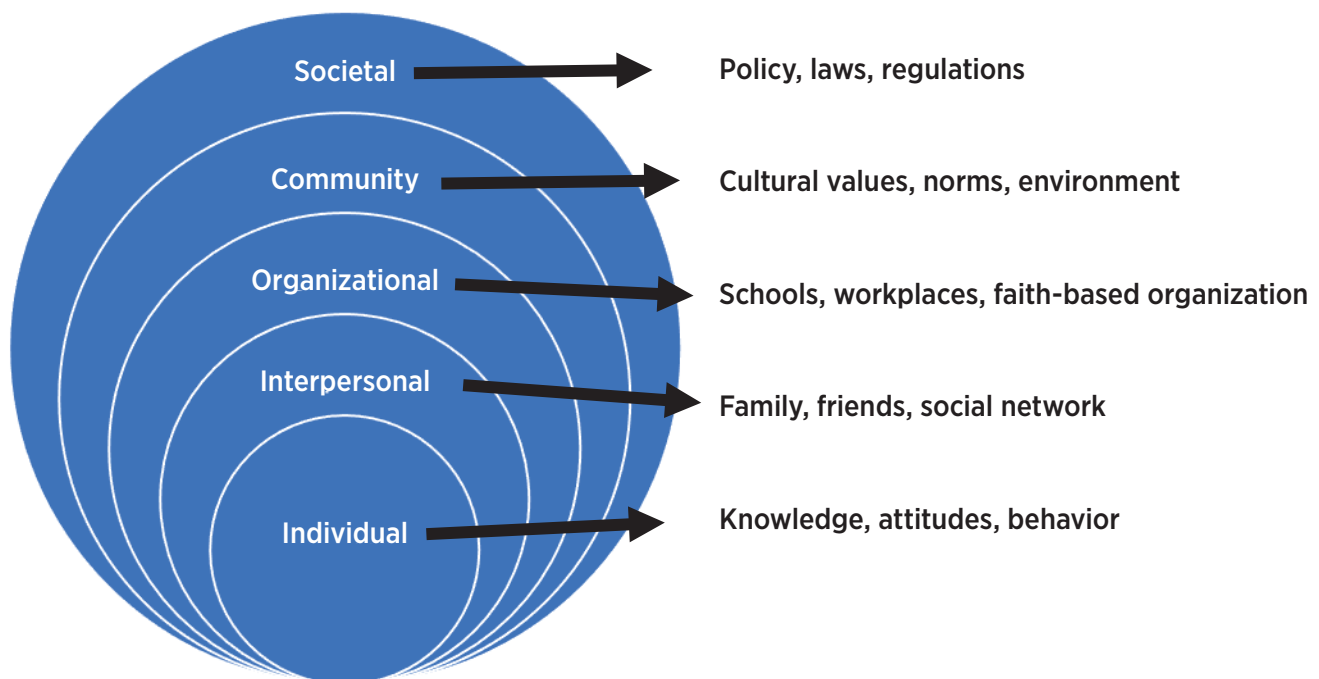


Figure 2. Socioecological Model.

How to get started

A needs assessment is a good first step to identify how to address food insecurity. Before beginning a needs assessment, it is important to determine the questions to be answered, the types of information needed to answer the questions and the users of the information.

Having a team to work on the assessment is a good way to engage communities and stakeholders. This can be a good project for a health council or Tennessee Nutrition Program coalition, and the team should include government, religious, health and education leaders as well as food retailers, farmers and community members.

Needs Assessment Methods

Existing data – County-level data provide information about how many people are food insecure, if specific populations are experiencing higher levels of food insecurity compared to others, and how many people are participating in nutrition assistance programs.

Asset mapping – This creates a visual inventory of what exists in communities. This can include a list of grocery stores, farmers markets, community gardens and food pantries.

Windshield audits – Driving or walking through a community provides another way to assess what exists in the community and any barriers to access such as not having sidewalks to walk to neighborhood stores.

Food retail assessments – These checklists provide information about types of foods available and whether the store accepts SNAP or WIC benefits.

Sources of Information for Needs Assessments

[US Census](#)

[Food Access Atlas](#)

[WIC Retailer Locator](#)

[SNAP Retailer Locator](#)

[Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit](#)

Food pantry assessments – These checklists provide information about what types of foods are available from local food pantries, hours of operation for food pantries, and how people qualify to receive benefits from food pantries.

Surveys – How household food insecurity is affecting individuals can be assessed through surveys. Questions could include where people are accessing food, such as stores and food pantries, and what barriers exist to accessing healthy food. Community partners can assist with outreach to diverse groups.

How to prioritize work

A good needs assessment will identify many ways food insecurity can be addressed. However, resources are usually limited so it is helpful to prioritize efforts.

A size and seriousness test is a simple method that can be done on your own or with a group.

Size – How many people would be affected? Assign ranks based on the number of people affected with 1 being the most.

Seriousness – To what degree will this affect the quality of life, environment and the economy? Assign ranks based on the level of seriousness with 1 being the most urgent issue.

Add size and seriousness together. The issue with the lowest score is the priority issue.

Look for quick wins that can help provide momentum. For example, compiling a food assistance resource list or hosting a forum on food assistance programs can be two ways to start the conversation about food insecurity to help mobilize the community to take additional steps.

Resources

[Psechange.org](https://psechange.org) Information about food systems, needs assessments

Extension publication: [PB1839 Needs Assessment Guidebook for Extension Professionals](#)

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