



RESEARCH REPORT

Evidence-Based Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity and Hunger in Vermont

Susan J. Popkin

Brandi Gilbert

Eowna Harrison

Olivia Arena

Nicole DuBois

Elaine Waxman

February 2019



ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Executive Summary	v
Gaps That Leave Children Vulnerable to Food Insecurity	v
Opportunities for Action and Investment	vi
Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity and Hunger	1
Methods	2
Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont	2
What Is Working Well in Vermont	6
Gaps That Leave Children Vulnerable to Food Insecurity	12
Opportunities for Action and Investment	19
Appendixes	25
Notes	43
References	46
About the Authors	48
Statement of Independence	51

Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the National Life Group Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We especially appreciate the opportunity to partner with National Life Group Foundation to tackle food insecurity issues in Vermont; it is an honor support their commitment to helping children and families in local communities. Special thanks to Beth Rusnock, Ross Sneed, David Soccodato, and Allison Steinmetz for their leadership and support. We are especially thankful to Felipe Rivera at The Vermont Community Foundation for being a critical part of this collaborative effort.

Lastly, we are grateful to all the residents and stakeholders in Vermont who shared their stories and experiences to inform this report. This work would not be possible without your willingness to engage around how food insecurity has affected the lives of children and families in Vermont, and to have rich discussions on how to most effectively disrupt food insecurity locally.

Executive Summary

Food insecurity is a persistent problem that threatens the well-being of many Vermont children and youth. Although the share of households that struggle with food insecurity nationally has decreased, 12.5 percent of US households (40 million households) experienced food insecurity in 2017, figures that are higher than before the Great Recession. The situation in Vermont mirrors these national trends. Despite economic gains and an expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one in eight Vermont households still struggles with food insecurity, and 19,000 children live in food-insecure households.

Although Vermont faces challenges with childhood food insecurity and hunger, the state has advantages that put it in a strong position to tackle this problem: Vermont is small, has a diverse economy, has an active community of stakeholders focused on this issue, and has several innovative interventions already in place.

The National Life Group Foundation (NLG) has taken on the challenge of reducing—or even eliminating—childhood food insecurity in Vermont. The NLG team contracted the Urban Institute in 2018 to help develop an effective strategy and a plan for targeted investment. The project had several goals: (1) review the publicly available data on childhood food insecurity in Vermont, (2) examine what interventions and initiatives are already under way, and (3) identify gaps where new investment could build on these efforts to substantially address childhood food insecurity.

Gaps That Leave Children Vulnerable to Food Insecurity

Our analysis identified several gaps that leave Vermont children vulnerable to food insecurity. Even though Vermont has taken full advantage of available options to expand SNAP's reach, federal rules disqualify some families in need. When families receive benefits, the benefits may not be enough to see families through the month. Many Vermonters also live in isolated, rural areas with limited access to healthy and affordable food. Inadequate public transit means that most families must rely on cars to travel, and youth may not be able to access meal programs or other services.

Furthermore, Vermont's aging population means that there are fewer children in the state. This situation is leading to cuts in education budgets and to school consolidation, which means children have to travel farther to school. Even at schools with universal school meals, students who arrive late cannot access the breakfast program unless their school participates in Breakfast After the Bell. And school

breakfast and lunch programs currently have a limited reach and do not serve most eligible students. At the other end of the age range, teenagers who are disconnected from the school system can have limited or inconsistent access to food services. For some Vermonters, the stigma associated with accessing food programs and the “Vermont culture” of giving and self-sufficiency can also be a deterrent to accessing food services.

Opportunities for Action and Investment

Vermont has a solid foundation to build on to make government and private-sector collaborations more effective. We identified several opportunities for action and investment.

Make School Meals Free for All Students

Vermont has eliminated reduced-price meals programs, and 65 schools offer free universal meals. But one in four eligible students still does not participate in the school lunch program, and fewer than half receive free breakfast. Other effective strategies include Breakfast After the Bell to maximize participation and serving lunch after recess when children are more likely to eat their full meal.

Expand Summer Feeding Options for Children and Their Families

There is a steep decrease in the number of students who receive summer meals compared with those who partake in school meal programs during the academic year, despite that the state has increased funds for summer food programs annually for the past 10 years. There is potential to address the summer food shortages by advocating for changes to the US Department of Agriculture’s Summer Food Service Program to make services more accessible for children in rural areas, including ensuring that children can leave the site with a meal, or alternatively receive summer electronic benefit transfer (EBT) benefits to purchase summer meals in areas where meal sites are not established.

Provide More Food-Centered Programming for Older and Disconnected Youth

Because many food programs are administered through schools, young people who do not attend school or are disengaged from school-based programming are commonly overlooked, though they may be even more likely to experience food insecurity because of limited resources and networks. Combining food with other services (e.g., recreation and health care supports) can help address stigma

and attract teenagers. Other strategies include handling food distribution discreetly when it is a stand-alone service, improving direct outreach to teenagers, and communicating that they can access services independently without a guardian or parent. It is also essential to engage youth in developing and implementing programs that serve them, through collaborative approaches.

Support Mobile Food Services

Because of rural isolation and the lack of transportation across the state, there is a need for creative solutions to get food to residents. This approach may involve building on current mobile food options, such as VeggieVanGo, or exploring new ideas for bringing food to central locations. Stakeholders also noted the potential to partner with Good News Garage—a car donation charity—and with innovative corporate sponsors in the transportation industry, such as Lyft and Uber.

Address Food Insecurity among Families Affected by the Opioid Crisis

The opioid crisis has hit Vermont hard, leaving many families struggling. Some grandparents with fixed incomes are supporting their grandchildren and may not know about or may be unwilling—because of the stigma—to apply for SNAP or other assistance. Other states are exploring programs to serve “grandfamilies,” including housing that incorporates services for both generations. Given the magnitude of the opioid crisis in Vermont, it would be worth exploring whether it is possible to nurture partnerships to provide more enhanced supports for grandfamilies—particularly supports that address food shortages.

Identify the Role of Private Industry

In addition to engaging corporate partners in food delivery, there is also potential to engage directly with employers to cultivate a more thriving workforce by tackling food insecurity. And, in addressing the root causes of food insecurity, employers should address wage gaps and ensure employees are earning livable wages.

Support Collective Efforts

Vermont has a strong tradition of partnership and collaboration around food insecurity. Significantly reducing childhood food insecurity will require even more collective action to maximize resources and drive systems change. In particular, stakeholders made a call for coalition building to work toward

shared goals and reduce duplication of services. Coalition building should draw on a range of stakeholder organizations who can support those experiencing food insecurity, and should take into account the diverse perspectives of local residents—especially given that Vermont has increasingly been a settlement site for New Americans. This effort would require a key organization to be the backbone for future collective work, equipped with the resources and funding to be a convener and long-term funding source to support ongoing programs and pilot new solutions that drive change.

Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity and Hunger

Persistent food insecurity threatens the well-being of many Vermont children and youth. Although the share of households that struggle with food insecurity nationally has decreased, 12.5 percent of US households (40 million households) experienced food insecurity in 2017, figures that are higher than before the Great Recession. The situation in Vermont mirrors these national trends: despite economic gains and an expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one in eight Vermont households still struggles with food insecurity.

Food insecurity poses serious threats to children and youth, potentially undermining their healthy growth and development. Nearly 13 million US children are considered food insecure—living in households with limited or uncertain access to adequate nutritious food.¹ In Vermont, the most recent data show that 19,000 children live in food-insecure households.² These children are likely to suffer from anemia, stomachaches, colds, chronic health conditions, and worse general and oral health. Additionally, poor health can contribute to adverse behavioral and mental health problems, undermining children's school performance and overall well-being (Gundersen and Ziliak 2014; Meisenheimer 2016). Older youth face special challenges, though most programs and interventions target younger children. Our work on food-insecure teenagers highlighted how food insecurity can push youth into expedited adulthood, placing them at greater risk for engaging in risky behavior, including stealing, drug dealing, or transactional sex (Popkin, Scott, and Galvez 2016; Waxman, Popkin, and Galvez 2015).

As the most recent data show, Vermont, like its New England neighbors, continues to face challenges with childhood food insecurity and hunger. But Vermont has advantages that put the state in a strong position to tackle this problem: Vermont is small, has a diverse economy, has an active community of stakeholders focused on this issue, and has several innovative interventions already in place.

The National Life Group Foundation (NLG) has taken on the challenge of reducing—or even eliminating—childhood food insecurity in Vermont. The NLG team contracted the Urban Institute in 2018 to help develop an effective strategy and a plan for targeted investment. The project had several goals: (1) review the publicly available data on childhood food insecurity in Vermont, (2) examine what interventions and initiatives are already under way, and (3) identify gaps where new investment could

build on these efforts to substantially reduce childhood food insecurity. The Urban team reviewed state- and county-level data on childhood food insecurity in Vermont and drew on other economic data to contextualize these findings. In addition, we targeted two of the regions with the highest levels of food insecurity in the state—Chittenden County and the Northeast Kingdom³ (see appendix A)—and interviewed stakeholders (e.g., service providers, advocates, and policymakers), and we held focus groups with adult and youth residents. Finally, we held a Data Walk at NLG’s headquarters in October 2018 to present our findings to stakeholders and NLG staff and to discuss next steps. This report presents our findings, including a review of existing programs, gaps that leave children vulnerable to food insecurity, and opportunities for intervention.

Methods

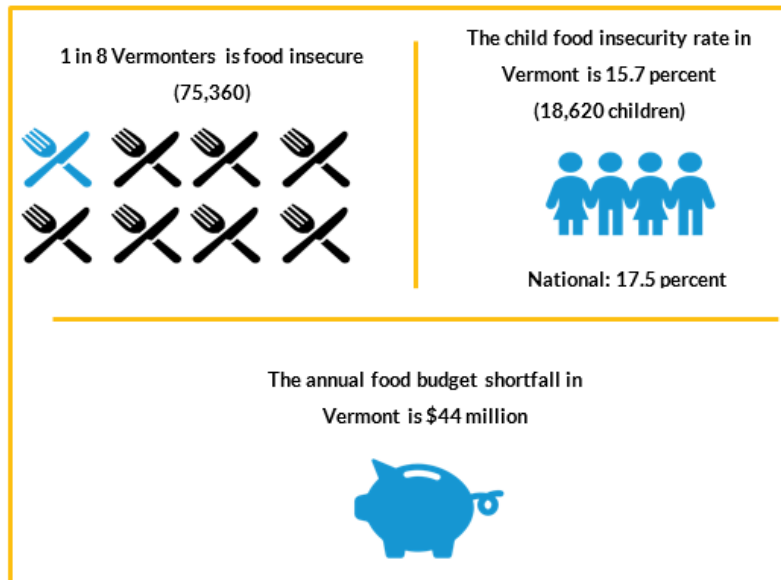
We took a mixed-methods approach to understanding the landscape of childhood food insecurity and hunger in Vermont. We conducted a preliminary literature and data review to inform our initial strategy. In collaboration with NLG, we identified major stakeholders working in the food insecurity arena. From the initial list of advocates, service providers, program administrators, and policymakers, we used referral sampling to recruit additional interview and focus group participants. We held focus groups with stakeholders and community members in Vermont. We spoke with 30 stakeholders (13 telephone interviews, 1 in-person interview, and 16 stakeholders in focus groups) and 18 residents (7 parents and 11 teenagers). Finally, we hosted a Data Walk to test our initial findings with local experts. The Data Walk included an overview of demographics in Vermont, a description of available food assistance programs and services, a summary of what the team learned from focus groups and interviews, and a section dedicated to brainstorming about future cross-sector collaboration. Appendix B includes an expanded methods section.

Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont

One in eight Vermont households struggles with food insecurity, which affects nearly 19,000 (or 16 percent of) children in the state (figure 1).⁴ The Vermont Foodbank’s figures are even higher; in 2015, it provided food to nearly 34,000 children. Vermont’s childhood food insecurity rate is similar to those in neighboring states, higher than New Hampshire (11.4 percent) and Massachusetts (12.1 percent) but lower than Maine (19.8 percent) and New York (17.9 percent) (Feeding America 2018).

FIGURE 1

Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont at a Glance



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap 2018.

High food, housing, utilities, and transportation costs contribute to food insecurity. Focus group and interview participants discussed how families who face high fixed costs for basic necessities often have to make trade-offs to pay bills, which can mean skimping on food.

Cost of Living

Median household income in Vermont (\$56,104) is slightly higher than the national average \$55,322),⁵ but the high cost of living undermines this advantage and leaves many families without enough resources to pay for housing, transportation, utilities, and food.

The national affordable housing crisis is affecting Vermont families. According to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, the state’s “housing wage” is the 13th highest in the nation. A worker earning Vermont’s minimum wage of \$10.50 an hour would have to work 85 hours a week to afford a modest two-bedroom apartment.⁶ And 41 percent of Vermont renters experience high housing cost burdens, spending 35 percent or more of their income on housing.⁷

The cost of food in Vermont is also higher than the national average. According to data from Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap project, the average cost of a meal in Vermont is \$3.39, higher

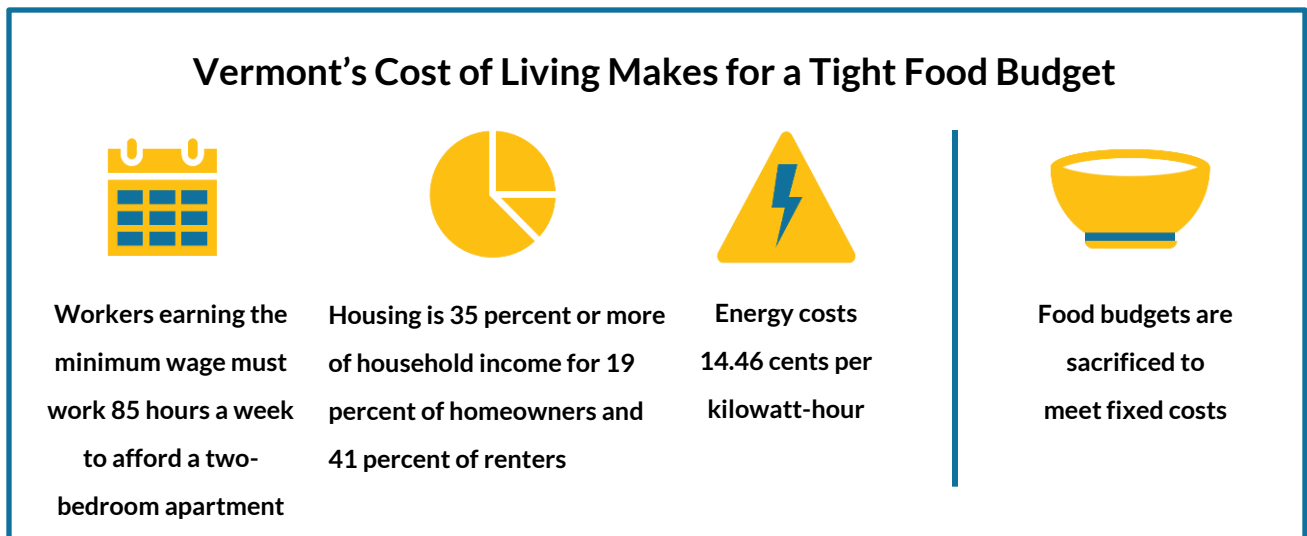
than the national average of \$3.00 (Feeding America 2018). Statewide, Vermonters would need an additional \$44 million each year to meet their food needs (figure 1).⁸

Compounding the high housing costs, Vermont has the nation’s eighth-highest electricity rates. In Vermont, electricity costs about 15 dollars per kilowatt-hour, compared with the national average electricity rate of 10 dollars per kilowatt-hour.⁹ Vermonters also confront high costs to heat their homes—oil heat costs more than gas, and the state has the second-highest home-heating oil consumption in the United States.¹⁰ Together, housing costs and utilities can significantly affect families’ food budgets (figure 2).

What I see as the biggest issues for people with low incomes in Vermont is housing and employment opportunities with living wages. What really comes from that is food insecurity, because it’s really economic insecurity. There is plenty of food out there; it’s about people being able to access the food they need to be healthy.

—Service Provider

FIGURE 2
How the Cost of Living in Vermont Limits Food Budgets

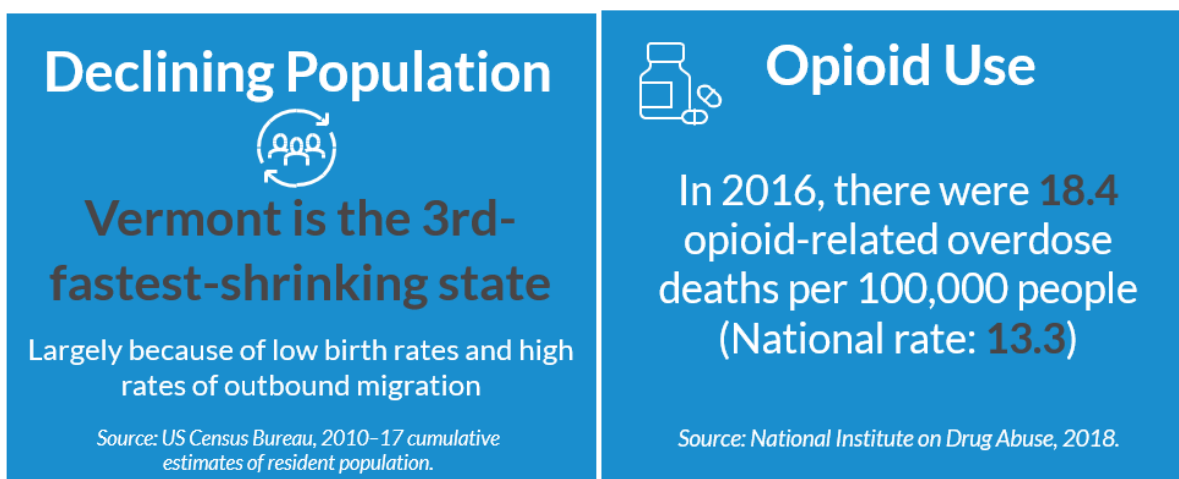


URBAN INSTITUTE

Sources: National Low-Income Housing Coalition, 2012–16 American Community Survey, and the US Energy Information Administration.

Vermont's high transportation costs also squeeze family budgets. Because the state is predominantly rural, 85 percent of workers ages 16 and older drive to work.¹¹ Public transportation in Vermont is limited, especially in rural areas. Where available, public transportation generally operates during limited hours. Many families either must spend their limited budgets on operating and maintaining cars or must spend significant time navigating inadequate transportation systems to reach grocery stores and food assistance programs.

Finally, our research indicates that two other major trends affecting Vermont—population decline and the opioid epidemic—are exacerbating childhood food insecurity. Vermont is the third-fastest-shrinking state in nation, mostly because of low birth rates. This situation could have long-term impacts on the state's economic health. In the short term, population shifts are leading to school consolidation. In recent years, 157 Vermont school districts have consolidated into 39 new unified districts, and another 18 districts are currently recommended for consolidation.¹² Focus group and interview participants explained that because Vermont is so rural, merging schools can lengthen students' commutes to school, which means they may not arrive early enough to participate in free breakfast programs. The shrinking population also means there will likely be fewer stores and charitable feeding programs serving an increasingly dispersed population.



As in the rest of New England, the national opioid epidemic has hit Vermont hard and is placing children at risk of food insecurity because of the economic instability families may experience when facing addiction. In 2016, there were 18.4 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people in Vermont, which is higher than the national rate of 13.3 deaths.¹³ Stakeholders explained the ways the opioid epidemic is affecting Vermont families, including large numbers of grandparents raising children whose parents are absent because of substance abuse. Many older adults live on fixed incomes, which means grandparents must stretch funds to include expenses for their grandchildren. This situation

causes financial strain and increases the need to access food shelves and other food assistance programs.

What Is Working Well in Vermont

It is clear from our scan of programs and initiatives and in-depth focus groups and interviews with stakeholders and residents that Vermont is well positioned to reduce childhood food insecurity. There is a strong farm-to-table culture that focuses on access to healthy food; policymakers, providers, and advocates focused on the issue have developed innovative programs; and the state government has expanded eligibility options for SNAP and increased access to free and reduced-price school meals. In this section, we review what we learned about what is working well in Vermont. In the following sections, we discuss the gaps that remain and the opportunities for action.

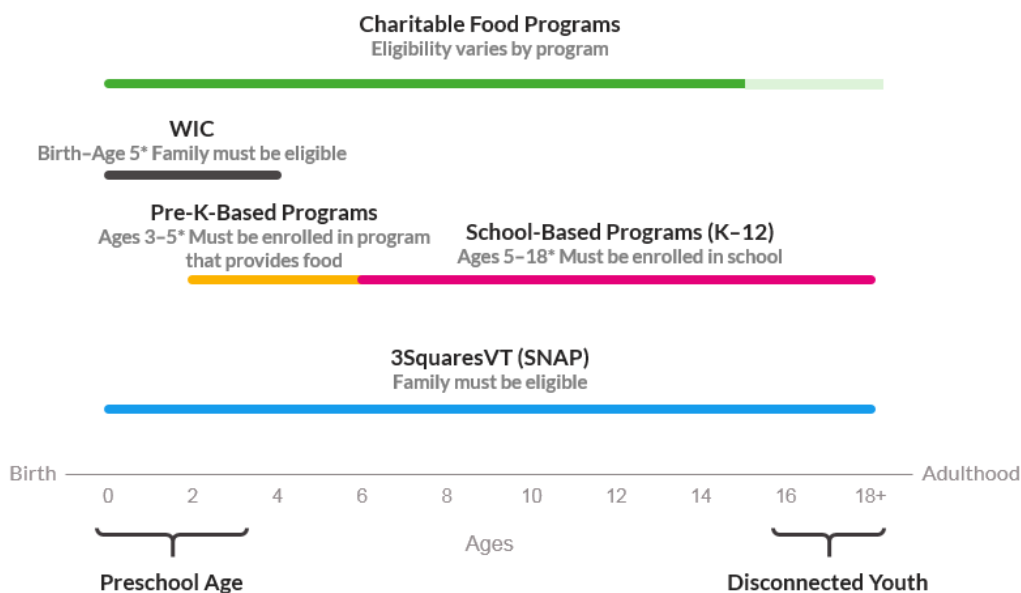
Strong Programs for Children and Families

Vermont has strong programs and partnerships that combat hunger and food insecurity, including major federal programs, free and reduced-price school meal programs, and local charitable food efforts. Figure 3 provides an overview of the programs that make up the food safety net programs.



Photo via Shutterstock.

FIGURE 3
Vermont Food Programs Available by Age of Participant



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: SNAP and WIC data.

Notes: SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. This figure shows the programs and benefits available to children from birth to adulthood, including government benefits (SNAP and WIC), school-based programs (often federally funded), and community-based programs. A child's participation in WIC and SNAP depends on their parent's enrollment. Similarly, participation in the National School Lunch Program and other school-based programs depends on youth being enrolled in school. The end of the green bar for community-based programs is faded to illustrate that most of these programs target younger children and taper off for teenagers, particularly disconnected youth who are not enrolled in school.

FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS FOCUSED ON FAMILIES

Vermont's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, 3SquaresVT, is the nutritional safety net for 40,037 households¹⁴ (70,874 people as of August 2018).¹⁵ More than 56 percent of participants have a child in the home, and 41 percent have a working adult. Notably, half have someone in the household who is elderly or disabled, which is higher than the national average of 33 percent.¹⁶ The average monthly 3SquaresVT benefit is \$235,¹⁷ close to the national average of \$249 (CBPP 2018). Because of state government efforts, Vermont has some of the highest SNAP participation rates in the country (92 percent in 2015)

Households participating in 3SquaresVT in 2018

40,037

Participation rate

92%

(Cunningham 2018). Further, Vermont has taken advantage of provisions that allow states to extend eligibility for SNAP to households at 185 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), a more generous designation than federal eligibility at or below 130 percent of the FPL. This provision extends eligibility to families with somewhat higher incomes who may also have significant expenses that make them eligible for benefits, providing essential food assistance to Vermonters who are at risk for food insecurity. When the provision was introduced, it opened access to about 30,000 more Vermonters, a significant number in such a small state.¹⁸ Accounting for this expanded eligibility, Vermont's Department for Children and Families, which administers 3SquaresVT, reported the SNAP take-up rate for all Vermonters at 185 percent of the FPL to be 45 percent. The department is working with community organizations to improve outreach and enrollment in 3SquaresVT (ESD, n.d.).

3SquaresVT is the linchpin of any strategy to address childhood food insecurity, as it is the only federal nutrition program that provides food assistance at the household level and regardless of the age of the children. Research suggests that even though parents may go to great lengths to shield their children from insufficient food resources, caregiver stress related to trade-offs between basic household needs may still have adverse effects on children. Emotional distress arising from food insecurity, including anxiety and depression, may interfere with parents' ability to be responsive to their children and affect childhood well-being (Whitaker, Phillips, and Orzol 2006; Zaslow et al. 2009). SNAP is an essential component to the safety net, as it is the only program that provides benefits to all members of the household and is not seasonally dependent—unlike school meals, which are provided to children typically during the academic year.

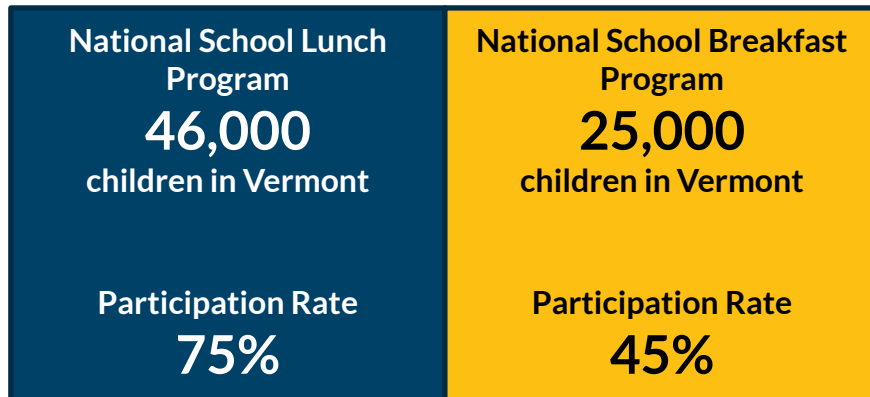
Another key federal nutrition program is targeted to younger children: the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which serves low-income children from birth to age 5, pregnant women, and new mothers with incomes below 185 percent of the FPL. In 2018, WIC assisted more than 11,400 women and children in Vermont, but as in other states, it reaches more families with infants than older children.¹⁹ WIC is a critical part of the food assistance safety net in Vermont. Evidence shows that it improves the physical health of participants and boosts children's development (Carlson and Neuberger 2017).

Child care and after-care-based programs. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides federal support for meals and snacks in child care programs and Head Start programs. An average of 13,428 Vermonters participated daily in programs covered by the CACFP,²⁰ providing nearly 4 million meals in 2018.²¹ The CACFP also funds snacks and meals for after-school programs, including dinners, but the cost and complexity of the requirements and the administrative burden of compliance necessary to receive the federal funds might discourage organizations from signing up (Ritchie 2012). Where it has

been implemented, CACFP reimbursement has improved the quality of food available to children in day care and helped with affordability of programs for low-income parents.²²

School-based programs. Schools in Vermont play a crucial role in feeding children through federally funded nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. Schools are also an easy access point for community programs that provide food to youth and families. One stakeholder noted, “The hero of [combating] food insecurity is the school system.”

The federal National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program are the primary school-based sources, providing free and reduced-price meals to children with qualifying incomes. In 2018, the National School Lunch Program served nearly 30 million children (Feeding America 2018), including nearly 46,000 in Vermont.²³ About half the students in the state qualify for the school lunch program, and 75 percent of eligible students participate. But substantially smaller numbers of students (about 25,000, or 45 percent of those eligible) participate in the school breakfast program.²⁴



Vermont has been a leader in working to increase participation in the school meal programs. In 2013, Vermont became the first state to eliminate the reduced-price lunch category. All eligible students instead receive their meals for free.²⁵ Because of this change, participation in the programs has increased substantially.²⁶ Now, more than 65 schools around the state—out of 250 schools²⁷—have universal school meals, ensuring that no students feel stigmatized or singled out for relying on the school for their meals and increasing the likelihood that all students who need food assistance receive it.²⁸ The US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Community Eligibility Provision allows schools to provide universal meals and be reimbursed as long as 40 percent or more of the students in the school or area served are directly certified (Hunger Free Vermont, n.d.). In 2017–18, 60 schools in the state participated in the provision.²⁹ The Summer Food Service Program provides federal funding to eligible meal sites when school is not in session. Around 300 food service sites served an average of 9,759 children through the program in 2018.³⁰

Community organizations have worked to integrate and promote participation in these federal nutrition programs. Hunger Free Vermont recently partnered with the New England Dairy and Food Council to challenge schools around the state to incorporate breakfast into their school days in innovative ways—known as Breakfast After the Bell—to increase participation (No Kid Hungry, n.d.). Around half of Vermont’s schools now incorporate breakfast into the school day.³¹ These successes have expanded food access to Vermont’s children, but there is still a long way to go. The number of students who participate in school breakfast and summer meal programs are still only a fraction of the 46,000 students who benefit from lunch during the normal school year.

In addition to federal programs, Vermont has numerous charitable food initiatives that use schools as a platform to provide food assistance to children. Vermont Afterschool supports schools serving children after school and during summer breaks. Some of these programs are supported by federal funding, including from CACFP. Seven thousand children participate in these after-school meal programs.³² The Vermont Foodbank also runs a school-based backpack program that serves about 1,500 children a week during the school year and the innovative VeggieVanGo program, which goes to 10 schools and 9 hospitals every two weeks to serve fresh produce and other healthy foods and offers cooking demonstrations and tastings.³³ Vermont Harvest of the Month operates through schools and features one food product each month with accompanying recipes and information to increase knowledge around healthy eating. These community-based programs play an important role in providing food assistance to children, but their reach is limited.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Our research highlighted the many cross-sector collaborations and interconnected partnerships focused on childhood food insecurity. Many energetic stakeholders work in collaboration across state and local government, health care, agriculture, local business, schools, advocacy, and other social service agencies. These partnerships have been strengthened with growing awareness of food insecurity in the state and are key to developing comprehensive approaches to addressing economic insecurity. Countless other nonprofit and government-affiliated initiatives are addressing food insecurity and other issues that may cause families to be insecure. These include human services, housing, and workforce and economic development agencies and organizations. People who experience food insecurity may be participating in programs unrelated to nutrition, such as certain health care or child care programs, but would benefit from signing up for 3SquaresVT or enrolling in other nutrition benefits. Engaging representatives from different social service sectors can open access points and

streamline service engagement and delivery. Local school districts and universities are strong partners for outreach, programming, and research.

Organizations, in explicit or implicit ways, [have] done a fantastic job acknowledging that not everyone has food. [We're] giving [food] in ways that are fun and accessible, instead of making it a handout.

—Service Provider

Many organizations have overlapping constituencies and work parallel to or in concert with each other. Some focus on one region or city, such as Burlington, Grand Isle, the Northeast Kingdom, and southern Vermont. Hunger Free Vermont launched 10 Hunger Councils to convene varied stakeholders and focus on place-based solutions motivated by each jurisdictions' specific needs and capacities.³⁴ Food insecurity is often a symptom of larger root causes of economic hardship, and cross-sector collaboration can uncover some of those issues. Having these conversations and possessing this knowledge enables communities to craft effective solutions. It also ensures that providers in all areas are aware of the needs of the communities they serve, enabling them to become more effective (e.g., health care providers understanding hunger and food insecurity in the patients they see). We spoke to staff at many organizations involved in this collaborative work for this study (see appendix C for a full list).

There are strong examples of cross-sector collaboration in the education sector, the health care sector, and the agriculture sector. The Vermont health care system has piloted a food insecurity screening and partnered to provide fresh produce at hospitals through Community Supported Agriculture shares and vegetable prescriptions. One stakeholder noted that Vermont Children's Hospital was one of the first pediatric hospitals to screen for food insecurity. There is research under way to assess how well these screenings reduce childhood food insecurity. The University of Vermont Medical Center contains an on-site food pantry. In Bennington, the hospital is partnering with a chef to give extra healthy food to schools.

I have been really impressed with the buy-in and shift of awareness and consciousness of the health care system around food insecurity and hunger.

—Advocate

Vermont's agriculture sector addresses food insecurity through gleaning and other work-related programs through organizations such as Vermont Youth Conservation Corps. These programs employ residents to harvest food that would otherwise be wasted and are paid for their work and given food. Working with the agriculture sector is critical in Vermont, given its crucial role in the economy and the state's unique culture around food. The Vermont Farm to School Network also works with various partners to address food insecurity, including schools, farms, the University of Vermont, the Vermont Community Foundation, and other nonprofit partners.³⁵ The network is cultivating a culture around farm engagement for youth from prekindergarten to fifth grade by developing and maintaining school gardens where children can access healthy produce. The Vermont Foodbank also purchases food directly from Vermont farmers, as part of Vermonters Feeding Vermonters. In Burlington, Intervale Center provides free memberships to Community-Supported Agriculture to families who are income eligible through its FairShare program.³⁶

Crop Cash is an incentive program that makes it affordable for low-income families to purchase produce at farmers markets. Developed by the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, this program leverages federal funding available through the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Grant Program.³⁷ Because Vermont has the most farmers markets per capita in the United States, these efforts to increase inclusivity are key to ensuring all Vermonters have access to local, healthy food options.³⁸ Although this program reduces costs, low-income families still find farmers markets unaffordable.

Gaps That Leave Children Vulnerable to Food Insecurity

Although Vermont has made food insecurity a priority, both through expanding the reach of its federal safety net and school meal programs and through its strong, innovative nonprofit sector programs and partnerships, childhood food insecurity remains a significant problem. In this section, we review what our research findings suggest about the gaps in the systems that leave Vermont children vulnerable to food insecurity.

Vermont has a high cost of living—housing and utility costs are expensive and constrain families' budgets. One stakeholder explained, "You can make your food budget flexible, but you can't make your rent budget flexible." Given the gap between the maximum SNAP benefit and the cost of food in Vermont, many families struggle to stretch federal benefits. Participants in our focus groups described the cost of food as a major challenge, particularly for fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and meat. One focus group participant said she sometimes skips meals so her children can eat. Others said they switch to cheaper options such as pasta at the end of the month when their SNAP benefits run low.

Stakeholders and focus group participants told us that low-income families often think that farmers markets and supermarkets that offer healthier produce are too expensive. Some families reported being forced to rely on cheaper, less healthy choices, particularly shelf-stable goods. In some places, residents have not used the farmers market Crop Cash benefits because they feel stigmatized. One stakeholder noted that "there are [still] prejudices and judgements made" around families using public benefits to pay for food in settings like farmers markets. The food assistance community continues to work to overcome this stigma. Another stakeholder noted, "The nutrition community has always been concerned with providing [farmers market food] to low-income individuals." Likewise, the Vermont Community Garden Network focuses on funding gardens that serve low-income individuals and families.³⁹

Young people in Vermont don't feel like they matter, and we need to think about how they matter, especially in rural communities where they have no transportation.

—Advocate

Rural Isolation

The rural and decentralized nature of the state's population and service centers makes it challenging for families to access affordable food and food assistance programs. Focus group participants living in rural communities told us their local stores offered limited choices and often lacked fresh produce, dairy products, or meats. Stakeholders also commented on the limited options, noting that although there may be smaller convenience stores in most communities, there are few high-quality grocers in rural areas. Additionally, youth-focused food programming may be limited because of the lack of accessible

youth programs or community centers. One resident told us that teenagers in her community have difficulty getting food in the summer because there is no central youth services location.

Access to healthy and affordable food options may hinge on transportation availability. Even in areas with grocery stores, the lack of public transportation limits residents' ability to purchase healthy options. Stakeholders and residents mentioned that using public transportation often requires multiple transfers, protracted waiting, and long travel times. These inconveniences are amplified when residents are traveling with children and transporting heavy items, such as laundry or groceries. As residents in our focus groups pointed out, the Rural Community Transit may run only a few times a day, may not follow reliable schedules, and can take hours between stops.

Because of limited public transit, many residents in rural areas must rely on cars. Focus group participants told us the costs of maintaining and fueling personal vehicles is a burden on residents struggling to make ends meet. Parents may not be able to reliably access food shelves or groceries, leaving their families without adequate food. The lack of transportation also means that youth cannot travel independently to access meal programs or other services, such as congregate feeding sites that provide group meals at specific community locations. The problem is not limited to Vermont's rural communities. Even in Burlington, the state's largest city, public transit routes and hours are limited.

In my experience when people become homeless or experience housing insecurity, they move, and then they are in a place where they don't know anybody, they can't borrow food or a ride.... In Vermont, you see it all the time, isolation.

-Advocate

Existing School- and Child Care-Based Programs Need to Be More Effective

We previously described Vermont's success in expanding the reach of its school meal programs. But even with this success, one in four eligible children does not participate in the school lunch program, and fewer than half participate in free breakfast programs.⁴⁰ School-based programs are not available when school is out of session, and some areas lack after-school programming. One stakeholder noted that options such as Head Start for low-income families provide nutritious food options, but for families that do not qualify or cannot enroll, it is difficult to find child care options, especially for young children. The lack of child care options more generally, and especially the subset of child care programs that do not

provide food, inhibit food access for young children. Both school-based and child care–based food programs and supports must be made more effective to reach the greatest number of youth more consistently.

Stakeholders and community members in our focus groups cited the lack of affordable high-quality child care as a challenge. According to a study from the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, child care slots in regulated centers have declined (Barrett and Wexler 2018).⁴¹ From 2015 to 2018, there was a 7 percent decrease in infant and toddler spots and an 18 percent decrease in school-age slots (Barrett and Wexler 2018).

Without affordable and consistent child care, it can be challenging for parents of young children to reliably provide food. For families of young children, child care costs can exacerbate pressures on a families' food budgets. According to Let's Grow Kids, nearly 80 percent of Vermont infants and toddlers who are likely to need child care do not have access to high-quality programs (Let's Grow Kids, n.d.). And high-quality child care programs may not provide food, as child care centers in Vermont are not required to provide food, even if rated a five, the highest rating on the Step Ahead Recognition System.

At the other end of the age range, teenagers who are disconnected from the school system also have limited or inconsistent access to programs. With most youth-focused food programs implemented through schools, teenagers who may not attend school or are not engaged in programming have few viable options for accessing food assistance. As some community members in our focus groups noted, older youth—whether connected or disconnected from school—are more reluctant to access free summer meal sites, perhaps because of “independence and pride,” or an aversion to receiving “charitable food.” Stakeholders who work in the field seem to be aware of these challenges and are working to reduce stigma by introducing choice into their programming or working to overcome transportation barriers.

School Consolidation

Vermont's population is declining because of demographic trends and out-migration, which is leading to fewer school-age youth enrolled in schools. Vermont's high schools graduate fewer students than they did a decade ago.⁴² These declines in enrollment can lead to cuts in education budgets and widespread school consolidation. From 2015 to 2018, 151 school districts were merged into 38 new districts.⁴³ Students in consolidated districts have to travel farther to school, which may make it more difficult to access early-morning “before the bell” breakfast programs and for summer meal programs at school

sites. Even at schools with universal free school meals, students arriving late cannot access breakfast programs unless their school participates in Breakfast After the Bell.

Kids can be stuck at home, and they may be five miles from a site that has summer meals, but they don't have any way to get there. We're not densely populated enough for them to take a bus or walk to a summer meal site. So that makes it more challenging to reach the kids and teens who need services, particularly in the summer when there's no school meals.

—Service Provider

Limitations of Federal Programs

Even though Vermont has taken full advantage of options to expand the reach of SNAP, low-income households remain vulnerable to food insecurity. Vermont has expanded eligibility to 185 percent of the FPL, but families that just miss the cutoff may still be food insecure. According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap, 42 percent of children in food-insecure households may not be eligible for federal assistance programs (Feeding America 2018). Because of increasingly stringent federal requirements, families in need may be disqualified. For instance, if a family member starts working more hours or earning more money, the household can be disqualified from receiving SNAP, Medicaid, or housing subsidies or have its benefits reduced. Families may be eligible but not enrolled, or may be ineligible but still unable to afford nutritious food regularly.

Further, even when families receive regular benefits, the funds often cannot get them through the month. Stakeholders noted that WIC can be difficult to obtain and use, given stringent program applications and allowable uses of funds—down to the right-sized milk and the fat content of yogurt. One parent in our focus group pointed out that limited quantities of infant formula and baby food may not be enough. And nationally, WIC participation rates drop for families of older children. According to the USDA (table 1), WIC participation rates in Vermont are 65.6 percent for families with infants, 78.4 percent for families with 1-year-olds, 85.6 percent for families with 2-year-olds, 58.5 percent for families with 3-year-olds, and 59.1 percent for families with 4-year-olds (Trippe et al. 2018). Though these figures do not show a clear step-down pattern, the rates for families with children up to age 2 are higher than for those with 3- or 4-year-olds, mirroring national trends.⁴⁴

TABLE 1

2015 WIC Participation Rates for Vermont and the US

	Families with infants	Families with 1-year-olds	Families with 2-year-olds	Families with 3-year-olds	Families with 4-year-olds	Total
Vermont	65.6%	78.4%	85.6%	58.5%	59.1%	64.5%
National	76.9%	62.8%	47.0%	41.8%	26.3%	52.7%

Source: Carole Trippe, Chrystine Tadler, Paul Johnson, Linda Giannarelli, and David Betson, *National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibles and WIC Program Reach in 2015* (Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, 2018).

Note: These data are 2015 rates.

Families reported that the last week of the month is particularly difficult and that they often run out of food. Their limited resources are further stretched in months with a fifth week. Even if families can make it through the month, the quality and healthfulness of meals may suffer. 3SquaresVT benefits are depleted three-fourths of the way through the month for some families, and there may be limited access to some foods at food pantries. One stakeholder said, “Parents are shielding kids for the most part from hunger itself; it’s the quality and variety of the foods.”

It is common to see families caught in a cycle where they’ve got 3SVT that they use up in the first two weeks of the month, so then in the second two weeks of the month is when they start making choices, like the high-carb choices. All these of course have health outcomes.

—Service Provider

Additionally, community members and stakeholders pointed out a lack of awareness about both governmental and community-based programming. Food programs may not be well advertised or may be embedded in other services, such as temporary housing—and therefore may not always be widely publicized. Community members that may feel stigmatized by asking for assistance are unlikely to seek out resources, even if they qualify. One community member said, “If you don’t know how to ask, you’re not going to find the help you need.” Community members emphasized that information about food service programs should be readily available, to encourage use from residents who may not be aware of or comfortable asking for assistance.

Serving Diverse Communities

Finally, community members and stakeholders noted that Vermont has increasingly been a settlement site for New Americans—immigrants and refugees. Food programs may lack culturally appropriate foods or common staples. Stakeholders in Burlington noted that attendance and satisfaction with community programs improved when the provided food was more culturally appropriate. A large Bhutanese population did not feel that community meals programs were meeting their needs until organizers brought in a chef to cook familiar cuisine. One stakeholder noted that in response to changing community demographics, the local school system has changed its menu, communicating the adaptations to parents. But stakeholders noted that larger programs such as WIC have more stringent food requirements that may not adequately accommodate New American communities, such as the requirement of providing brown rice instead of white rice. Furthermore, stakeholders noted the need for more embedded translation services to support non-English speakers in navigating services.

As national immigration policy continues to change, ramifications of changes should be assessed at the state level. The proposed changes to the “public charge” rule may discourage immigrants from accessing SNAP benefits. The proposed rule would consider the use of noncash benefits such as SNAP in an applicant’s application for a temporary visa or to become a lawful permanent resident.⁴⁵ In addressing food insecurity in all Vermont communities, it will be crucial to dedicate resources and specialized services to these communities.

Culture and the Stigma Surrounding Assistance

For some Vermonters, the stigma associated with accessing food programs and the “Vermont culture” of giving and self-sufficiency deter people from accessing food services. Stakeholders explained that many Vermonters do not think they qualify for food assistance because they can put food on the table. Although they may be able to provide food for their families, the quality and healthfulness of food may vary. Stakeholders highlighted that many families may not realize that they are food insecure and are less likely to believe they qualify for food supports. Stakeholders also mentioned that many Vermonters do not believe they are the most in need and want resources to go to residents with less access.

Stakeholders emphasized that there is a stigma associated with receiving supports, and many residents will not admit they need food assistance. Residents also talked about the stigma of asking for support and how a lack of program advertising may be leaving out eligible residents. While there may be resources and services available, residents have to know where and how to access them.

There's also an unbelievable pride and resistance to asking for help, high desire for privacy. We know there are many more kids who would be eligible for school meal programs, but their family won't fill out the application.

—Advocate

There are many forms of food insecurity. Some families are consistently food insecure, and others may experience intermittent food insecurity because of a precipitating event, such as an illness or job loss. For each group, support may look different. Some families may benefit from ongoing structured support that focuses on the compounding effects of poverty. For others, providing short-term support may help them out of a specific situation. It may be challenging for families to receive support if they are new to a community or are experiencing food insecurity for the first time. For all families and communities at large, the stigma around receiving support for food must be addressed.

Opportunities for Action and Investment

Given the momentum in Vermont around addressing childhood food insecurity, there is a great foundation to build on to make both government and private-sector collaborations more effective. In this section, we discuss recommended strategies for augmenting Vermont's efforts toward alleviating childhood food insecurity from resident and stakeholder feedback and from drawing on national best practices from other communities.

Make School Meals Free for All Students

School feeding programs are at the heart of addressing food insecurity for thousands of students. Vermont has already eliminated the reduced-price meals program, and 65 out of 250 schools offer universal meals. But one in four eligible students still does not participate in the school lunch program, and fewer than half receive free breakfast. There should be a concerted effort to make school meals universal to provide free meals to all students throughout the state. Adopting a universal free meal model would allow all students access to the same healthy meals and remove the application process, which could minimize stigma around accessing school meal programs.



Photo via Shutterstock.

In addition to expanding access to school meals, stakeholders also recommended advocacy efforts around Vermont schools to shift the timing of meals, such as serving breakfast during the school day. Studies have shown that serving breakfast during the school day can reach more students, and students who eat breakfast are more likely to perform better academically and socially (Sanderson et al. 2015). There are several models for Breakfast After the Bell (e.g., offering grab-and-go options or second-chance breakfast). Schools can adopt a model that works best for them, including allowing students to pick up breakfast from the cafeteria during their first break or transition period or providing breakfast in the classrooms using temperature-controlled portable bags or transporters. Given the transportation challenges that the rural character of the state present, as well as the large-scale school consolidation, adopting innovative models for Breakfast After the Bell is essential for serving Vermont children and youth.

Expand Summer Feeding Options for Children and Their Families

There is a steep decrease in the number of students who receive summer meals compared with those who partake in school meal programs during the academic year, even though the state has increased funds for summer food programs annually for the past 10 years.⁴⁶ There is potential to address the summer food shortages by advocating for changes to the USDA's Summer Food Service Program—designed as a congregate feeding program that provides meals in a group setting, requiring youth to

consume meals on-site at a specific time. Though stakeholders stressed that in rural areas where children cannot make it to the meal sites, this becomes a barrier to access. Program changes are needed to ensure that children can leave the site with a meal or receive summer EBT benefits to purchase summer meals in areas where meal sites are not established.

With a growing emphasis on increasing summer meal participation throughout the US, other states have employed several strategies, such as the following (Anderson et al. 2018; Binder 2016; Troutman 2014):

- Increasing awareness of summer meal sites by sending letters from schools, distributing informational flyers through community organizations, and encouraging parent-to-parent and parent-to-teacher outreach
- Making summer meals more convenient for families by increasing the number of sites, expanding hours, and providing transportation
- Supporting the family more holistically by providing meals for parents
- Pairing nutritious meals with youth recreational and educational activities

Stakeholders in Vermont should also consider developing a plan and application for the state to apply for the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) Grant Program.⁴⁷ The program is being tested in selected states and has provided a monthly benefit during the summer on SNAP or WIC EBT cards to children eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Findings from early demonstration programs indicate that providing a \$30 or \$60 monthly food benefit decreases food insecurity and increases access to more nutritious foods among low-income families (Abt, Mathematica, and Maximus 2016).

Provide More Food-Centered Programming for Older and Disconnected Youth

Because many food programs are administered through schools, young people who do not attend school or are disengaged from school-based programming are commonly overlooked, though they may be more likely to experience food insecurity because of limited resources and networks.

Teenagers in our focus groups recommended that food programming for older youth be welcoming, easily accessible, fun, and inclusive of diverse communities. They also pointed out the importance of dealing with stigma, as accepting food services can be sensitive. As local youth noted, teenagers may be more likely to participate in food-related programming if it is embedded in larger programs—for

example, basketball or tennis lessons through the Parks and Recreation Department or through recreational activities with the Boys and Girls Club in Burlington.

Studies corroborated the need for teenager-friendly food programming. For instance, the Bringing Teens to the Table report noted that teenagers recommended combining food with other services (e.g., recreation and health care supports) so that attendance does not mean acknowledging food insecurity. They also recommended handling food distribution discreetly when it is a stand-alone service and improving direct outreach to teenagers and communicating that they can access services independently without a guardian or parent (Abt, Mathematica, and Maximus 2016). The Urban Institute has also uplifted lessons learned from developing a teenager food literacy program collaboratively with youth, focusing on the importance of identifying local food-related challenges and solutions through a youth-driven approach (Galvez et al. 2018).

Support Mobile Food Services

Because of rural isolation and the lack of transportation across the state, there is a need for more creative solutions to get food to residents. This approach may involve building on current mobile food options, such as VeggieVanGo, or exploring new ideas for bringing food to central locations. Stakeholders also noted the potential to partner with Good News Garage—a car donation charity—and with innovative corporate sponsors in the transportation industry, such as Lyft and Uber. These are areas for further exploration. Though mobile food services can be effective, they require complex efforts to staff and run them. One stakeholder noted that many food service programs depend on volunteers, but mobile services require more paid staff and have additional costs to maintain and operate the vehicles.

There may also be potential to take advantage of government-funded food delivery programs. In 2017, the USDA funded the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot, allowing residents to use benefits to purchase food online and receive home delivery through selected retailers.⁴⁸ The pilot is anticipated to start in 2019 in Alabama, Iowa, Maryland, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Washington State and could have major long-term implications if it is funded and adopted nationally.

Address Food Insecurity among Families Affected by the Opioid Crisis

The opioid crisis has hit Vermont hard. When working-age parents become addicted to opioids, the effects on family economic stability can be profound, such as loss of income if a parent cannot work

steadily. The opioid epidemic has also left many grandparents to raise their orphaned grandchildren (creating “grandfamilies”), and grandparents may not know about or may be unwilling—because of the stigma—to apply for SNAP or other food assistance programs.

The older generation [in Vermont] has an ethic of taking care of ourselves, and a lot of the older people think somebody needs it more, or I'm taking it away from someone else, or I'm not eligible for that.

—Service Provider

Vermont has begun addressing the opioid crisis. In 2018, Vermont announced more than \$200,000 in grants to help address the crisis.⁴⁹ Through these and other initiatives, it is essential to consider supports for grandfamilies. There are many ways to do this, and some states are exploring housing programs to serve grandfamilies that incorporate services for both generations, which could include food services. Vermont is also engaging in efforts to offer new approaches to treating drug addiction, such as offering treatment services as a part of needle exchange programs.⁵⁰ Developing partnerships with organizations working at various points of contact with families struggling with addiction could disrupt food insecurity.

Identify the Role of Private Industry

In addition to engaging corporate partners in food delivery, there is also potential to engage directly with employers to cultivate a more thriving workforce by tackling food insecurity. Stakeholders engaged in the study pointed out that employers should consider sponsoring Community-Supported Agriculture programs in the workplace and subsidizing participation when possible. Additionally, employers may consider maximizing existing systems to address the food needs of employees and their families, such as expanding health care savings accounts to include food expenses. To make changes to health care savings accounts, federal laws would have to change. This would require legislative changes at the national level to make healthy food costs an allowable expense. Lastly, in addressing the root causes of food insecurity, employers should address wage gaps and ensure employees are earning livable wages.

Support Collective Efforts

Vermont has a strong tradition of partnership and collaboration around food insecurity. Significantly reducing childhood food insecurity will require even more collective action to maximize resources and drive systems change. In particular, stakeholders called for coalition building to work toward shared goals and reduce duplication of services. This coalition would channel existing efforts and bring in stakeholders that may not be fully represented, such as the transportation industry. Further, it would be a space to learn about effective collective actions in other communities around childhood food insecurity and other social change issues and to determine how to adapt these strategies for communities in Vermont. In developing creative approaches to end childhood food insecurity, partnerships must engage collaborators serving marginalized communities, such as New Americans.

Stakeholders pointed out the need for a key organization to be the backbone for future collective work, equipped with the necessary resources and funding to be a convener. Agencies participating in collective impact work to address food insecurity should also have supports to engage in a meaningful and sustainable manner, such as funded staff time, local travel expenses, and meals during meetings. Additionally, there is a need for long-term funding to support ongoing programs and pilot new solutions that drive change.

Appendix A. Food Insecurity by County

TABLE A.1

Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont, by County, 2016

County	Population younger than 18	Childhood food insecurity rate	Estimated food-insecure children	Food insecurity rate (full population)
Essex	1,129	18.7%	210	13.3%
Bennington	7,124	18.1%	1,290	12.2%
Orleans	5,480	18.0%	990	12.9%
Windham	8,211	17.2%	1,420	12.6%
Lamoille	5,353	17.2%	920	12.4%
Caledonia	6,306	17.0%	1,070	12.1%
Rutland	11,003	16.4%	1,810	12.3%
Orange	5,636	16.2%	910	11.0%
Washington	11,589	16.0%	1,860	11.3%
Windsor	10,495	14.8%	1,550	11.0%
Grand Isle	1,289	14.8%	190	9.8%
Addison	6,723	14.5%	970	10.4%
Franklin	11,296	14.0%	1,580	10.6%
Chittenden	30,057	13.4%	4,040	11.7%

Source: Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap 2018.

Appendix B. Expanded Methods Section

Data Scan and Literature Review

In the first phase of this research, we conducted a background data scan and literature review to identify areas and groups in need. Pulling data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap, the American Community Survey, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Vermont Department for Children and Families, the Vermont Agency of Education, and other sources, we assembled a picture of childhood food insecurity in Vermont. The preliminary data scan helped identify areas to guide the project's data collection efforts, focusing on the two places with the greatest need: the Northeast Kingdom and Burlington.

Qualitative Data Collection

In collaboration with NLG, we identified major stakeholders working in the food insecurity arena. From the initial list of advocates, service providers, program administrators, and policymakers, we used referral sampling to recruit additional interview and focus group participants. We conducted 13 telephone interviews and 1 in-person interview with stakeholders.

We visited Vermont in August 2018 and held six focus groups with stakeholders and community members to better understand how food insecurity differs in disparate geographies. Two focus groups involved 16 organizational stakeholders and drew on referrals from previous phone interviews (a list of represented organizations can be found in appendix C). These groups were held in Montpelier and Burlington. The four community focus groups consisted of teenagers and parents who were recruited by local nonprofit organizations in the Northeast Kingdom and Burlington.

Focus groups and interviews were structured around understanding the landscape of food insecurity, which groups were primarily affected, what food insecurity looks like for youth at different ages, what current responses look like, and what additional strategies for disrupting food insecurity could be developed and implemented. These conversations helped point the team toward new areas of discovery and refine recommendations for combating childhood food insecurity.⁵¹

Data Walk

Finally, we held a Data Walk with stakeholders to present our initial findings and brainstorm collaborative solutions for addressing childhood food insecurity in Vermont. A Data Walk is an opportunity for the research team to engage stakeholders and program participants in interpreting the data, validating findings, and providing feedback. The Data Walk included an overview of demographics in Vermont, a description of available food assistance programs and services, a summary of what the team learned from focus groups and interviews, and a section dedicated to brainstorming about future cross-sector collaboration. Twenty-five stakeholders from across the state, including several that participated in our initial interviews and focus groups, cycled through topical stations to view study data displayed on large posters. At each station, a research team member provided explanations and offered prompts for discussion. The event ended with an “Imagination Station” that engaged participants in brainstorming ways to improve existing programs or develop new approaches, policies, or programs to address childhood food insecurity and hunger. We have integrated ideas generated from the discussion at the Data Walk into the final section of the report.

Appendix C. Organizations Represented in Interview or Focus Groups

Organizations represented

Boys and Girls Club
Burlington Parks & Recreation Department
Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
Children's Health Watch
Chittenden County Emergency Food Shelf
Committee on Temporary Shelter
Economic Services Department
Green Mountain Farm to School
High Gate Apartments
Hunger Free Vermont
King Street Center
Let's Grow Kids
Northeast Kingdom Community Action
Northwestern Georgia Health Center
Office of Economic Opportunity
Office of Senator Leahy
Our Community Cares Camp
State of Vermont
Spectrum Youth & Family Services
Vermont Afterschool
Vermont Birth to Five/Permanent Fund for Vermont's Children
Vermont Foodbank
Vermont Youth Conservation Corps

Appendix D. Stakeholder Interview Guide

Interview Date

Facilitator:

Note Taker

Name, Title, and Contact Information of Person Interviewed:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. My name is _____ and this is my colleague _____. We both work for the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization in Washington, D.C.

Study Overview

We are conducting this interview to learn more about how families in Vermont access food, and in particular what kinds of challenges children and teens experience when they do not have enough food at home. This work is funded by the National Life Group Foundation. National Life Group Foundation is the foundation arm of the National Life Group, a Vermont-based company that protects families and business with life insurance, annuity, and investment products and is interested in helping to address food insecurity issues. They plan to use what we learn from the study to lead an effort, working with others in Vermont, to help end child hunger.

Consent

We see you as knowledgeable about the experiences of families in Vermont, so we want to get your perspective on the ongoing needs of families that may not have access to enough healthy food. We are not evaluating you, your organization, or the programs it provides. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can ask to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Additionally, we will not attribute your responses to you or name you or your office in our research reports. Your responses will be aggregated with those of other respondents, but you should be aware that due to your specialized perspective/expertise, while we will work to prevent it, some readers may attribute information to you, and it may be possible to identify your comments despite our best efforts.

This interview is a supplement to information we will gather from small discussion groups with parents of children of all ages and teens about food insecurity issues in Vermont. We will ask you questions about your organization (i.e., how are you engaging children and their families, providing referrals and follow-up), community challenges or barriers to accessing food, and directions for future efforts to end food insecurity issues. We will use the information you provide to better understand the local food system and what food insecurity looks like here. We may include what you say in project reports.

The interview should take about 45 minutes to an hour. Given what we have discussed, do you consent to the interviews? Do you have any questions before we begin?

We/I also want to let you know that we/I will be taking notes of your responses so we can ensure we are accurate in our reflections of your responses. Would it be okay if we record the interview? Please note that the recording is solely for our team to use for note taking purposes. It will not be shared with

anyone outside of the research team. [Note: If interviewee does not agree to be audio recorded, indicate that we will not use the recorder and only take notes.]

Respondent/Organization Background

Let's start by you telling me a bit about yourself and about your current position at your organization.

1. Can you give us a little background on your organization, the community it serves (e.g. geography, demographics, age range), and the services or programs it provides?
2. What are some of the big needs you see in the community? [For those serving a range of areas]: How do these needs vary across the areas you serve?
[Probe: Workforce support, transportation needs, mental and physical health, childcare, better schools, affordable housing, opportunities for social involvement]
3. Do you engage with families or children in the community to specifically help them access food? If yes, how? If not, do you think your programs or services impact a family's ability to provide or access food?

Food Insecurity in the Community

As we said at the beginning of the interview, we are interested in learning about food insecurity and hunger for families and children in Vermont. We recognize your organization may not be specifically involved in local food systems or may not deliver food services to families, so if you feel like you are unable to answer a question, we can skip it. However, because food insecurity and hunger can be the byproducts of other challenges, families experiencing them may be seeking support in other areas – workforce support, housing support, social services, physical and mental health resources.

4. How do you define food insecurity? And what do you think food insecurity looks like in the communities you serve in Vermont?
[PROBE: Consider the time of the month (e.g. beginning vs end); the time of the year; impact of food insecurity on older teens vs younger siblings, parents vs. kids, etc.]
 - a. Are there particular characteristics of community members who have consistent issues with food insecurity?
5. Where do you think people in the community who regularly or periodically struggle with not having enough food, get their food?
[PROBE: Grocery stores, corner stores, food shelves, soup kitchens, restaurants, carry outs, fast food, a community member that feeds other community initiatives?]
6. If families are short on food, where can they turn to in the community to help them?
[Probe: 3Squares VT (Vermont SNAP); local organizations; informal networks of friends, family members, and community members]
 - a. What are challenges or barriers to accessing these food resources?
[Probe: Stigma, travel time to get to services, availability (e.g., only available certain days or times of month, issues qualifying for services)]

Youth and Food Insecurity

Next we'd like to talk more about food insecurity among children and youth.

7. Where do you think most children in the broader community get the food that they eat day to day? Are food sources for younger children different from those available to older youth—particularly teens?

[Probe: Schools, summer camps, food trucks, grocery stores, corner stores, restaurants, carry outs, fast food, soup kitchens, food shelves]

- a. What, if anything, makes it difficult for children to access food support?

[Probe: Gaps in terms of geography, times of the day or week, types of food, etc.]

8. If children in the community need food, where can they turn? And are they able to access these resources independently (without help for a parent or another adult)?

[Probe: Local/school food shelves, backpack programs, afterschool programs, summer camps, trusted adults]

- a. How do you think children perceive these services or programs?
- b. Do they feel safe in these spaces? What makes these spaces attractive for teens other than the fact they serve emergency food? Do you think there is a stigma attached to receiving these services?

9. Do you think youth are involved in helping their families obtain or pay for food? Tell me about that.

[Probe: Strategies such as youth buying/bringing home extra food; providing meals for other family members (like younger siblings), kids being recipients of programs like the Backpack program]

10. Do you think teens face additional barriers when it comes to getting food, in comparison with younger children? If so, what barriers?

[PROBE: Stigma, transportation, safety]

Strengthening Approaches to Addressing Childhood Food Insecurity

Next, we'd like to ask you big picture questions about the direction of future food insecurity efforts in Vermont.

11. What changes do you think could be made to help children and families have better access to healthy foods?

[Probe: Changes at both the local and federal level]

12. In terms of the service your organization provides to support children and families facing food insecurity, what would you say is going well? And what could be improved or strengthened?

13. We recognize that food insecurity can be caused by multiple, often mutually experienced, factors, like unemployment, a lack of affordable housing, limited transportation options, health challenges. What do you see as the biggest factors that are driving local food insecurity among children and families?

14. What organizations do you think need to work together or collaborate to help address food insecurity, including the factors that drive it? Are there any ways that these organizations could strengthen their collective approach?

- a. Do you partner with any organizations to provide services? How can the range of organizations helping families address food insecurity issues in Vermont continue to forge and strengthen collaborative efforts to work together?

15. Are there any strategies or programs for addressing childhood food insecurity in Vermont that have not been drawn on, but could be beneficial? (e.g. feel free to get creative).

- a. Are there minor tweaks or changes that you believe would significantly strengthen existing services and programs?
- b. Do you think these changes would be more effective for some communities versus others? Why?

Appendix E. Stakeholder Focus Group Guide

[1.5 hours]

Procedure (for researchers on site)

1. Welcome the participants and invite them to serve themselves a meal and then sit down.
2. Once participants are seated, explain that researchers will first ask everyone for verbal consent. Participants who feel uncomfortable have the option to leave at any time.
3. Once all participants are seated and ready, read the following script and Informed Consent statement.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to our focus group, and thank you for joining us today. My name is _____ and this is my colleague _____. I am going to be leading the conversation today. My colleague will be taking notes and helping me out. We work for the Urban Institute which is an independent research organization in Washington, D.C. This work is funded by the National Life Group Foundation. National Life Group Foundation is the foundation arm of the National Life Group, a Vermont-based company that protects families and business with life insurance, annuity, and investment products and is interested in helping to address food insecurity issues. They plan to use what we learn from the study to lead an effort, working with others in Vermont, to help end childhood hunger here.

We see you as knowledgeable about the experiences of families in Vermont, so we want to get your perspective on the ongoing needs of families that may not have access to enough healthy food. We are not evaluating you, your organization, or the programs it provides. This discussion will be supplemented by information we will gather from small discussion groups with parents of children of all ages and teens about food insecurity issues in Vermont. We will ask you questions about your organization (i.e., how are you engaging children and their families, providing referrals and follow-up), community challenges or barriers to accessing food, and directions for future efforts to end food insecurity issues. We will use the information you provide to better understand the local food system and what food insecurity looks like here. We may include what you say in project reports.

Our discussion will last for about an hour and a half. There will be no formal breaks, but please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, go to the bathroom, or get something to eat or drink.

Next, we'd like to go over the consent form you see in front of you...

[Facilitator reads consent script. Assistant collects completed parent consent forms and issues incentive payment to participants who choose not to continue.]

We/I also want to let you know that we/I will be taking notes of your responses so we can ensure we are accurate in our reflections of your responses. Would it be okay if we record the focus group? Please note that the recording is solely for our team to use for note taking purposes. It will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. [Note: If focus group participants do not all agree to be audio recorded, indicate that we will not use the recorder and only take notes.]

Do you have any questions about the focus group or anything I have just said? [Pause for reply. Allow participants to sign consent form.] If there are topics or questions raised during this conversation that you want to talk about, please reach out to [INSERT STAFF PERSON OR ORGANIZATION]. **I am going to begin recording our conversation now. Let's get started**

Respondent/Organization Background

Let's start by you telling me a bit about yourself and about your current position at your organization.

1. **Can you give us a little background on your organization, the community it serves (e.g. geography, demographics, age range), and the services or programs it provides?**
2. **What are some of the big needs you see in the community? How do these needs vary across the areas you serve?**
[Probe: Workforce support, transportation needs, mental and physical health, childcare, better schools, affordable housing, opportunities for social involvement]
 - a. We recognize that food insecurity can be caused by multiple, often mutually experienced, factors. Are any of these community needs associated with food insecurity?

Food Insecurity in the Community

As we said at the beginning of the discussion, we are interested in learning about food insecurity and hunger for families and children in Vermont. Let's start by talking about how you define food insecurity.

3. **How do you define food insecurity? And what do you think food insecurity looks like in the communities you serve in Vermont?**
[Probe: Consider the time of the month (e.g. beginning vs end); the time of the year; impact of food insecurity on older teens vs younger siblings, parents vs. kids, etc.]
 - a. Are there particular characteristics of community members who have consistent issues with food insecurity? Who are these people? What other issues are they juggling?
4. **If families are short on food, where can they turn to in the community for help?**
[Probe: 3Squares VT (Vermont SNAP); local organizations; informal networks of friends, family members, and community members]
 - a. What are challenges or barriers to accessing these food resources?
[Probe: Stigma, travel time to get to services, availability (e.g., only available certain days or times of month, issues qualifying for services)]
 - b. What about when school is on break (summer, winter, holidays, etc.)?
 - c. Are these efforts available in all or most areas? What areas are hard to reach or underserved, and why?

Youth and Food Insecurity

Next, we'd like to talk more about food insecurity among children and youth.

5. **Where do you think most children in the broader community get the food that they eat day to day? Are food sources for younger children different from those available to older youth—particularly teens?**
[Probe: Schools, summer camps, food trucks, grocery stores, corner stores, restaurants, carry outs, fast food, soup kitchens, food shelves]
 - a. What, if anything, makes it difficult for children to access food support?
[Probe: Gaps in terms of geography, times of the day or week, types of food, etc.]
6. **If children in the community need food, where can they turn? And are they able to access**

these resources independently (without help for a parent or another adult)?

[Probe: Local/school food shelves, backpack programs, afterschool programs, summer camps, trusted adults]

- a. How do you think children perceive these services or programs?
- b. Do they feel safe in these spaces? What makes these spaces attractive for teens other than the fact they serve emergency food? Do you think there is a stigma attached to receiving these services?

Strengthening Approaches to Addressing Childhood Food Insecurity

Next, we'd like to ask you big picture questions about the direction of future food insecurity efforts in Vermont.

- 7. What changes do you think could be made to help children and families have better access to healthy foods?**
[Probe: Changes at both the local and federal level, systems-level approaches]

- 8. Are there any strategies or programs for addressing childhood food insecurity in Vermont that have not been drawn on, but could be beneficial? (e.g. feel free to get creative).**
 - a. What organizations do you think need to work together or collaborate to help address food insecurity?
 - b. Are there minor tweaks or changes that you believe would significantly strengthen existing services and programs?
 - c. Do you think these changes would be more effective for some communities versus others? Why?

Appendix F. Parent Food Insecurity Focus Group Guide and Protocol

[1.5 hours]

Procedure (for researchers on site)

4. Welcome the participants and invite them to serve themselves a meal and then sit down.
5. Once participants are seated, explain that researchers will first ask everyone for verbal consent. Participants who feel uncomfortable have the option to leave at any time.
6. Once all participants are seated and ready, read the following script and Informed Consent statement.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to our focus group, and thank you for joining us today. My name is _____ and this is my colleague _____. I am going to be leading the conversation today. My colleague will be taking notes and helping me out. We work for the Urban Institute which is an independent research organization in Washington, D.C. This work is funded by the National Life Group Foundation. National Life Group Foundation is the foundation arm of the National Life Group, a Vermont-based company that protects families and business with life insurance, annuity, and investment products and is interested in helping to address food insecurity issues. They plan to use what we learn from the study to lead an effort, working with others in Vermont, to help end childhood hunger here.

Our discussion will last for about an hour and a half. **As experts on your community, we encourage you to think creatively about food issues—and we look forward to hearing your recommendations.** will be no formal breaks, but please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, go to the bathroom, or get something to eat or drink. At the conclusion of the session, we'll distribute \$25 in cash as a token of our appreciation for your time and have you sign a receipt.

Next, we'd like to go over the consent form you see in front of you...

[Facilitator reads consent script. Assistant collects completed parent consent forms and issues incentive payment to participants who choose not to continue.]

Thanks for completing the consent form. Again, we appreciate you being here today. Today's discussion is to help us learn more about access to food for young people and their families. We will do that by using a focus group. A focus group is a way to interview a group of people about their opinions and attitudes towards something. Your decision to participate in this focus group is completely voluntary and if you choose to participate you do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. If you choose to participate you will receive \$25 cash as a thank you for attending. If you decide to participate but later decide you do not want to continue, you may leave at any time and still receive the \$25.

Focus groups are voluntary and confidential. Please guard what you say if you are uncomfortable with the possibility of someone sharing it outside of this room. Though, we like to ask you to respect other's privacy when we leave so that everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts. Also, note that researchers are required to take steps, including reporting to authorities, a situation where they believe someone they speak to may harm themselves or others.

We would like to record the discussion today to make sure we have your thoughts recorded accurately. Nobody outside the research team will be allowed to listen to the tapes and they will be destroyed at the end of the study. If anyone in the focus group objects, we will not record the conversation. Does anyone not want to be recorded?

Do you have any questions about the focus group or anything I have just said? [Pause for reply. Allow participants to sign consent form.] If there are topics or questions raised during this conversation that you want to talk about, please reach out to [INSERT STAFF PERSON OR ORGANIZATION]. **I am going to begin recording our conversation now. Let's get started.**

Introductions and Community Background (10 minutes)

1. Let's go around the table for introductions. Please share just your first name, how many children you have, and their ages. If there is anything you do not feel comfortable sharing with the group, please feel free to leave that out of your introduction.
2. Tell us a little bit about your life in [area of Vermont]. What is your community like? [Probe: Access to services and amenities, school quality, transportation, demographics, local political structure, crime]
 - ADDITIONAL PROMPTING CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS:
 - How do people get around? Is there public transportation? How often does it run?
 - Do many people in your community own their own homes? Rent?
 - What jobs or employment opportunities are available in your community? Where do people work?
 - Are job opportunities stable or temporary? Do people feel like they can earn enough at work to provide for themselves/their families?
 - Do you feel your community is safe? Is there a feeling of community?
 - How are the schools in the area? Are there youth activities outside of school?

Where do families get their food? (10 minutes)

3. Think about the stores in and around your community that sell food. Tell me the first word that comes to mind to describe these places.
 - What do you wish they sold that they don't?
4. Where else do children and families in your community buy food? Are food sources for younger children different from those available to older youth? [PROBE: Think about grocery stores, vendors, food carts, restaurants, carry-outs, any place that sells food]
5. What do you think families in your community care about most when buying food? [PROBE: Nutrition, cost, convenience, taste]

What makes getting food difficult? (20 minutes)

Now I would like to talk about some of the challenges residents in your community face in getting food.

6. Do you think families in your community worry about not having enough food? Are there any differences in concerns around food for younger children, as compared to teens?

- Do you think this happens a lot or not so much here?
 - Is there a specific time of month when food runs low? Time of year?
7. Sometimes families have to rely on cheap food, eat less healthy food, or eat the same things a lot because that is what they can afford. Do you think that happens here? What foods do you think people rely on when money is tight?
 8. What do you think is causing some families to not have enough food? Are these families facing other difficulties?
[PROBE: Looking back at the answers to the introductory questions, reflect on community.]
 9. When money is tight, where can children and families go for food?
 - What about places like food shelves, churches, or food pantries?

Barriers or triggers for food insecurity (20 minutes)

10. What are some ways that families make ends meet when they cannot provide enough food for their household?
 - Are there specific times of the year it is more difficult to access food?
 - What are some of the tradeoffs you think families make to provide food?
[Probe: Rent, utilities, car payments, work, etc.]
11. To what extent do you think families in the area access government programs like SNAP (3SquaresVT) and/or WIC to get food?
 - Have you heard if these programs are easy or hard to access? What might be some factors that keep families from participating? (paperwork, not many stores that accept them, not high enough value, lack of knowledge about potential benefits, etc.)
 - Have you heard families (parents or youth) say how they feel about using these programs?
12. Are youth in the community involved in helping their families get food?
 - Where do they go to get food?
 - Are teens providing meals for younger siblings?
13. How important are schools in helping youth access food?
 - Are there food backpacks or afterschool programs that provide snacks or dinner that kids use?
 - How do kids feel about getting free or reduced cost food from school? Does age factor into this? Do you think there is a stigma around participating in these programs?
14. What kind of programs that help families get the food they need do you think youth would be comfortable connecting with?
[PROBE: how could programs change to be better for youth to use OR what kind of new programs could there be?]

Wrap-Up (10 minutes)

It's important that parents are involved in decisions about services and programs that are available to families and young people. Thank you for talking to us today.

15. What could be changed in your community to help families have access to the food they need?

[PROBE: Food programs located at other service centers, more transportation options, more affordable housing, options/credit for discounted utilities, mental and physical health resources and substance abuse support, childcare, workforce supports/ employment resources]

- 16.** What programs could be added or changed in your community to help youth access food?

[PROBE: Ways to reach rural youth, ways to ensure youth have food during summer and other times when food gaps are exacerbated?]

- 17.** Is there anything else you think we need to know about the food issues we talked about today?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas.

Remind participants of services available to them and their families:

We know that some of these issues may be difficult to process so if you need someone to talk to, there are family case managers here at [partner agencies]. They can get you connected to services that can help your family get food, as well as counseling, job programs and other supportive social services. Please call [insert partner office number] if you feel like you need support. They are here to help. You can also see one of our research team members to help connect you to these services.

Distribute incentives and sign receipts.

Appendix G. Teen Food Insecurity Focus Group Guide and Protocol

[1.5 hours]

Procedure (for researchers on site)

1. Welcome the participants and invite them to serve themselves a meal and then sit down.
2. Once participants are seated, explain that researchers will first ask everyone for verbal consent. Participants who feel uncomfortable have the option to leave at any time.
3. Once all participants are seated and ready, read the following script and Informed Consent statement.

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to our focus group, and thank you for joining us today. My name is _____ and this is my colleague _____. I am going to be leading the conversation today. My colleague will be taking notes and helping me out. We work for the Urban Institute which is an independent research organization in Washington, D.C. This work is funded by the National Life Group Foundation. National Life Group Foundation is the foundation arm of the National Life Group, a Vermont-based company that protects families and business with life insurance, annuity, and investment products and is interested in helping to address food insecurity issues. They plan to use what we learn from the study to lead an effort, working with others in Vermont, to help end childhood hunger here.

Our discussion will last for about an hour and a half. **As experts on your community, we encourage you to think creatively about food issues—and we look forward to hearing your recommendations.** There will be no formal breaks, but please feel free to get up at any time to stretch, go to the bathroom, or get something to eat or drink. At the conclusion of the session, we'll distribute \$25 in cash as a token of our appreciation for your time and have you sign a receipt.

Next, we'd like to go over the consent form you see in front of you...

[Facilitator reads consent script. Assistant collects completed parent consent forms and issues incentive payment to participants who choose not to continue.]

Thanks for completing the consent form. Again, we appreciate you being here today. Today's discussion is to help us learn more about access to food for young people and their families. We will do that by using a focus group. A focus group is a way to interview a group of people about their opinions and attitudes towards something. Your decision to participate in this focus group is completely voluntary and if you choose to participate you do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. If you choose to participate you will receive \$25 cash as a thank you for attending. If you decide to participate but later decide you do not want to continue, you may leave at any time and still receive the \$25.

Focus groups are voluntary and confidential. Please guard what you say if you are uncomfortable with the possibility of someone sharing it outside of this room. Though, we like to ask you to respect other's privacy when we leave so that everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts. Also, note that researchers are required to take steps, including reporting to authorities, a situation where they believe someone they speak to may harm themselves or others.

We would like to record the discussion today to make sure we have your thoughts recorded accurately. Nobody outside the research team will be allowed to listen to the tapes and they will be destroyed at the end of the study. If anyone in the focus group objects, we will not record the conversation. Does anyone not want to be recorded?

Do you have any questions about the focus group or anything I have just said? [Pause for reply. Allow participants to sign consent form.] If there are topics or questions raised during this conversation that you want to talk about, please reach out to [INSERT STAFF PERSON OR ORGANIZATION]. **I am going to begin recording our conversation now. Let's get started.**

Introductions and Community Background (10 minutes)

1. Let's go around the table and say our first name and our grade.
2. Tell us a little bit about your life in [area of Vermont]. What is your community like? (e.g. access to services and amenities, crime, school quality, transit links, race/ethnicity, income/poverty, local political structure).
 - PROMPTING QUESTIONS:
 - What is your school like? Do you have the same friends in school and in your community?
 - What do you do outside of school? Are you involved in any afterschool activities? Sports? Arts?
 - How do you get around? Is there transportation? Do your families have cars? Do you bike? Ride the bus?

Where are teens getting food? (15 minutes)

Now we are going to switch gears a little bit to talk about food in your community. Think about the stores in and around your community that sell food.

3. Think about the stores in and around your community that sell food. Tell me the first word that comes to mind to describe these places.
 - What do you wish they sold that they don't?
4. Where do teens like you get your food from? How about younger children?
[Probe: Schools, summer camps, food trucks, grocery stores, corner stores, restaurants, carry outs, fast food, soup kitchens, food shelves]
 - b. What, if anything, makes it difficult for children to access food support?
[Probe: Gaps in terms of geography, times of the day or week, types of food, etc.]
 - Do kids participate in free school lunch? How about breakfast?
 - How do kids feel about these programs? How do teens feel about getting free or reduced cost food from school?
5. Think about teens you know, are they involved in helping their families get food? Tell me about where they go to get food (and why).

What makes getting food difficult? (35 minutes)

Now I would like to talk about some of the challenges young people in your community face in getting food.

6. Do you think young people in your community worry about not having enough food? Tell me about that.

- Do you think this happens a lot or not so much here?
 - Is there a specific time of month when food runs low? Time of year?
7. Sometimes families have to rely on cheap food, eat unhealthy food, or eat the same things a lot because that is what they can afford. Do you think that happens here? What foods do you think people rely on when money is tight?
- [PROBE: How do people in your community treat families, parents and kids, who run out of food?]
8. When money is tight, where can children and families go for food? (e.g. shelves, churches, or food pantries)?
- Do teens go to these places or just adults?
 - What makes it hard for youth to go to a food pantry or other places that give out food?
- [PROBE: Think about teens you know, is this a big issue or a small one. Is this the same for kids of all ages?]
9. Are there certain times a year when it's harder to get food? Are there certain geographic areas where it is harder to get food?
- What do kids do during school breaks (like the summer), if they usually get food at school?
 - Are there other programs kids use?
10. What kind of programs that help children and families get the food they need? How do you think teens or younger kids feel about these programs?

Wrap-Up (10 minutes)

It's important that youth are involved in decisions about services and programs that are available to other young people. Thank you for talking to us today.

11. What could be changed in your community to help young people and their families have access to the food they need?
- Other/new programs? Services?
12. If you made a food program, what would it be like? What would you do? What would the food be like? Where would it be? Would it be afterschool or on weekends?
13. If you could talk to your principal about the food programs in your school, what would you say?
14. Is there anything else you think we need to know about the food issues we talked about today?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas.

Remind participants of services available to them and their families:

We know that some of these issues may be difficult to process so if you need someone to talk to, there are family case managers here at [partner agencies]. They can get you connected to services that can help you and your family get food, as well as counseling,

job programs and other supportive social services. Please call [insert partner office number] if you feel like you need support. They are here to help. You can also see one of our research team members to help connect you to these services.

Distribute incentives and sign receipts.

Notes

- ¹ Estimate from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap data from 2015. See "Child Food Insecurity in the United States," Feeding America, accessed January 15, 2019, <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2015/child>.
- ² "Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont," Feeding America, accessed January 15, 2019, <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2016/child/vermont>.
- ³ The Northeast Kingdom comprises Essex, Orleans, and Caledonia Counties.
- ⁴ "Childhood Food Insecurity in Vermont," Feeding America.
- ⁵ American Community Survey, 2012–16 five-year estimates for total population.
- ⁶ "Out of Reach 2018: Vermont," National Low-Income Housing Coalition, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://nlihc.org/oor/vermont>.
- ⁷ American Community Survey, 2012–16 five-year estimates for total population.
- ⁸ This food budget shortfall is assessed by the Current Population Survey and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). The survey asks respondents how much additional money they would need to buy enough food for their household each week. This figure is scaled to the USDA's assertion that people in food-insecure households have trouble, on average, seven months out of the year.
- ⁹ "State Electricity Profiles," US Energy Information Administration, last updated January 8, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/electricity/state/>.
- ¹⁰ "Heating Oil and Propane Update," US Energy Information Administration, last updated January 9, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/heatingoilpropane/#itn-tabs-2>.
- ¹¹ American Community Survey, 2012–16 five-year estimates for total population.
- ¹² "Merger Activity," Vermont Agency of Education, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools/school-governance/merger-activity>.
- ¹³ See the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality at <https://wonder.cdc.gov>.
- ¹⁴ "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Number of Households Participating," US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/30SNAPcurrHH.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Number of Persons Participating," US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/29SNAPcurrPP.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Catlin Nchako and Lexin Cai, "A Closer Look at Who Benefits from SNAP: State-by-State Fact Sheets," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, last updated December 3, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets#Vermont>.
- ¹⁷ "3SquaresVT," Vermont Agency of Human Services, Department for Children and Families, accessed January 15, 2019, <http://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits/3SquaresVT>.
- ¹⁸ "Governor Douglas Expands Food Assistance Eligibility," *Vermont Business Magazine*, September 9, 2008, <https://vermontbiz.com/news/september/governor-douglas-expands-food-assistance-eligibility>.
- ¹⁹ "WIC Program: Monthly Data—State-Level Participation by Category and Program Costs," US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, last updated December 7, 2018, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>.

- ²⁰ “Child and Adult Care Food Program: Average Daily Attendance,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/12ccfypart.pdf>.
- ²¹ “Child and Adult Care Food Program: Total Meals Served,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/13ccmeals.pdf>.
- ²² “Child and Adult Care Food,” Vermont Agency of Education, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://education.vermont.gov/student-support/nutrition/child-and-adult-care-food>.
- ²³ “National School Lunch Program: Total Participation,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/01slfypart.pdf>.
- ²⁴ “Hunger in Vermont,” Hunger Free Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/hungerinvermont/>; “School Breakfast Program: Total Participation,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/08sbfypart.pdf>.
- ²⁵ “School Meals,” Hunger Free Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/school-meals/>.
- ²⁶ “State and Federal Advocacy,” Hunger Free Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/state-federal-advocacy/>.
- ²⁷ “Vermont Schools,” Vermont Agency of Education, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools>.
- ²⁸ “Hunger Free Vermont 2016 Program Successes,” Hunger Free Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/annual-report-2016-successes/>.
- ²⁹ “Eligibility for Community Eligibility Provision,” Food Research and Action Center, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://frac.org/community-eligibility-database/>.
- ³⁰ “Summer Food Service Program: Average Daily Attendance,” US Department of Agriculture, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/pd/04sffypart.pdf>.
- ³¹ Amanda Thibault, “Fueling Kids for Success, Vt. Moves Up in School Nutrition Rank,” MyChampionValley.com, February 21, 2018, <https://www.mychamplainvalley.com/news/fueling-kids-for-success-vt-moves-up-in-school-nutrition-rank/984646525>.
- ³² “Hunger in Vermont,” Hunger Free Vermont.
- ³³ “VeggieVanGo,” Vermont Foodbank, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/share-food/veggievango>.
- ³⁴ “Hunger Councils,” Hunger Free Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.hungerfreevt.org/hunger-councils/>.
- ³⁵ “Our Partners,” Vermont Farm to School Network, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://vermontfarmtoschool.org/our-partners>.
- ³⁶ “Gleaning and Food Rescue,” Intervale, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.intervale.org/programs/#fbanner>.
- ³⁷ “Crop Cash Program,” Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://nofavt.org/cropcash>.
- ³⁸ “Local Food Directories: National Farmers Market Director,” US Department of Agriculture, January 16, 2019, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets/>.

- ³⁹ See the website for the Vermont Community Garden Network at <https://vcgn.org/>.
- ⁴⁰ “School Breakfast Program: Total Participation,” US Department of Agriculture. Hunger Free Vermont. “School Breakfast Participation Matters: Research & Best Practices.” Hunger Free Vermont. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/586e858220099e929f5eca70/t/588a59c8414fb59b1d55cd98/1485461961659/SchoolBreakfast_ResearchBrief_2014.pdf.
- ⁴¹ April McCullum, “It’s Harder to Find Child Care in Vermont. Here’s What the Numbers Show,” *Burlington Free Press*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2018/11/29/its-harder-find-child-care-vermont-fewer-slots/2129597002/>.
- ⁴² Art Woolf, “Vermont Sees Record Low Births Again. Here’s What the Future Looks Like as a Result,” *Burlington Free Press*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/money/2018/05/31/vermont-sees-another-record-low-birth-rate-heres-why-matters/655701002/>.
- ⁴³ “Merger Activity,” Vermont Agency of Education.
- ⁴⁴ These figures are from the 2015 American Community Survey, which has limited sampling. Small states such as Vermont may have irregularities in data (e.g., more eligible 1-year-olds than infants), but the pattern of eligibility among young kids decreases from birth to age 4. More information on the figures can be found in Trippe and coauthors (2018).
- ⁴⁵ Elaine Waxman, “By Targeting SNAP, the Expanded ‘Public Charge’ Rule Could Worsen Food Insecurity,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, November 15, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/targeting-snap-expanded-public-charge-rule-could-worsen-food-insecurity>.
- ⁴⁶ “National School Lunch Program: Total Participation,” US Department of Agriculture; “Summer Food Service Program: Average Daily Attendance,” US Department of Agriculture.
- ⁴⁷ “FY 2019 Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (Summer EBT) Grant Program,” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, last updated November 27, 2018, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/fy-2019-summer-electronic-benefit-transfer-children-summer-ebt-grant-program>.
- ⁴⁸ “Food Distribution Programs,” Vermont Foodbank, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.vtfoodbank.org/share-food/np-distribution>.
- ⁴⁹ Bernie Sanders, US Senator for Vermont, “Vermont Delegation Announces More Than \$200,000 in Grants to Help Address Opioid Crisis in Vermont,” press release, September 14, 2018, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/vermont-delegation-announces-more-than-200000-in-grants-to-help-address-opioid-crisis-in-vermont>.
- ⁵⁰ German Lopez, “A Vermont Needle Exchange Isn’t Just Giving Out Syringes. It’s Offering Treatment on the Spot,” *Vox*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/11/20/18096123/opioid-epidemic-vermont-needle-exchange-buprenorphine>.
- ⁵¹ Focus group and interview guides are in appendixes D–G.

References

- Abt, Mathematica, and Maximus (Abt Associates, Mathematica Policy Research, and Maximus). 2016. "Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report 2011–2014 (Summary)." Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.
- Anderson, Signe, Randy Rosso, Alex Boyd, and Crystal FitzSimons. 2018. "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition States Report." Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center.
- Barrett, Stephanie, and Chloe Wexler. 2018. *Child Care and Prekindergarten Capacity Baseline Report*. Montpelier: Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office.
- Binder, Christine. 2016. *Summer Meals Barriers Analysis*. New York: Hunger Free NYC.
- Carlson, Steven, and Zoë Neuberger. 2017. *WIC Works: Addressing the Nutrition and Health Needs of Low-Income Families for 40 Years*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
- CBPP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). 2018. *Chart Book: SNAP Helps Struggling Families Put Food on the Table*. Washington, DC: CBPP.
- Cunyngham, Karen. 2018. "Reaching Those in Need: Estimates of State Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation Rates in 2015—Summary." Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture.
- ESD (Vermont Agency of Human Services, Department of Children and Families, Economic Services Division). n.d. "State of Vermont Outreach Plan." Montpelier, VT: ESD.
- Feeding America. 2018. "Map the Meal Gap 2018." Chicago: Feeding America.
- Galvez, Martha M., Megan Thompson, Micaela F. Lipman, Susan J. Popkin, and Elaine Waxman. 2018. *Exploring Teen Food Insecurity in Portland, Oregon*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Gundersen, Craig, and James P. Ziliak. 2014. "Childhood Food Insecurity in the US: Trends, Causes, and Policy Options." Princeton, NJ: The Future of Children.
- Hunger Free Vermont. n.d. "Community Eligibility (CEP): A Pathway to Universal Free School Meals." South Burlington, VT: Hunger Free Vermont.
- Let's Grow Kids. n.d. "Focus on the First Years." Burlington, VT: Let's Grow Kids.
- Meisenheimer, Melanie. 2016. "Food Insecurity in Early Childhood." Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.
- No Kid Hungry. n.d. "Breakfast After the Bell: Policy Solutions from across the US." Washington, DC: No Kid Hungry.
- Popkin, Susan J., Molly M. Scott, and Martha M. Galvez. 2016. *Impossible Choices: Teens and Food Insecurity in America*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Ritchie, Lorrene. 2012. "Barriers and Facilitators to Providing Meals and Snacks That Align with the Current Dietary Guidance." In *Research Methods to Assess Dietary Intake and Program Participation in Child Day Care*, edited by Leslie Pray, Ann Yaktine, and Sheila Moats, 35–48. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Sanderson, Mieka, Crystal FitzSimons, Wendy Forbes, and Beverly Hutton. 2015. "School Breakfast After the Bell: Equipping Students for Academic Success." Washington, DC: Food Research and Action Center; Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Trippe, Carole, Chrystine Tadler, Paul Johnson, Linda Giannarelli, and David Betson. 2018. *National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibles and WIC Program Reach in 2015*. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support.

- Troutman, Parke. 2014. *Help Them Eat at Home: Why the Federal Summer Meals Program for Kids Has Chronically Low Participation and What Can Be Done about It*. San Diego Hunger Coalition.
- Waxman, Elaine, Susan J. Popkin, and Martha Galvez. 2015. *Bringing Teens to the Table: A Focus on Food Insecurity in America*. Chicago: Feeding America.
- Whitaker, Robert C., Shannon M. Phillips, and Sean M. Orzol. 2006. "Food Insecurity and the Risks of Depression and Anxiety in Mothers and Behavior Problems in Their Preschool-Aged Children." *Pediatrics* 118 (3): 859–68.
- Zaslow, Martha, Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew, Randolph Capps, Allison Horowitz, Kristin A. Moore, and Debra Weinstein. 2009. "Food Security during Infancy: Implications for Attachment and Mental Proficiency in Toddlerhood." *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 13 (1): 66–80.

About the Authors



Susan J. Popkin is director of the Urban Institute's Housing Opportunity and Services Together Initiative and an Institute fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. A nationally recognized expert on public and assisted housing policy, Popkin directs a research program that uses community engagement and community-based participatory approaches to explore new strategies for improving outcomes for families, and in conducting evaluations of complex community-based interventions. She has led several projects focusing on how food insecurity affects the lives of youth living in chronically disadvantaged communities, and developing innovative, community-based solutions with local teens. Popkin is the author of *No Simple Solutions: Transforming Public Housing in Chicago*; coauthor of the award-winning *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty*; lead author for the book *The Hidden War: Crime and the Tragedy of Public Housing in Chicago*; and coauthor of *Public Housing Transformation: The Legacy of Segregation*.



Brandi Gilbert is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her work focuses on youth development, with an emphasis on the intersection between education and housing. Most recently, she has led an annual School Climate Survey as a part of the DC Promise Neighborhoods evaluation and guided an assessment of the Tacoma Housing Authority's Children's Savings Account Program. She is the deputy director of a Walmart Foundation-funded project examining food insecurity among youth and adults in cities across the US. Additionally, Gilbert has conducted studies examining disaster preparedness, response, and recovery initiatives, including focusing on the impact of disasters on children and youth. Gilbert earned her BA in elementary education from the University of Delaware and her PhD in sociology from University of Colorado Boulder.



Eowna Harrison is a research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. She is the project manager for the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety project, a cluster randomized controlled trial of a community-based curriculum for teens living in DC public housing developments. Harrison is a trained family demographer whose work examines women's strategies to achieving their

reproductive goals. She focuses on pathways that lead to racial disparities in unintended pregnancy rates, infant and child outcomes, and general health. Before joining Urban, Harrison worked with the Maryland Population Research Center, where she assisted with quantitative and qualitative research in evaluating a statewide intervention to address unintended pregnancy. Harrison earned her PhD in sociology from the University of Maryland.



Olivia Arena is a research analyst in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. Her background is in urban studies and international relations, with a focus on science, technology, and the environment, and a minor in geography. At Urban, she is a member of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, which coordinates a national network of data intermediaries working together to further the development and use of neighborhood information systems in local policymaking and community building. As a part of the Housing Opportunity and Services Together team, she researches housing as a platform for service delivery, innovative models of service delivery, and two-generation programming. She is helping provide technical assistance for a two-generation program in Bangor, Maine. She graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a BA in Plan II Honors, international relations and global studies, and urban studies.



Nicole DuBois is a research analyst in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center. Her work relates to housing, homelessness, and the federal safety net. Before joining Urban, she worked in community organizing in Iowa and Ohio and has conducted research around medication-assisted treatment and the privatization of the criminal justice system.



Elaine Waxman is a senior fellow in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Her expertise includes food insecurity, nutrition and the food assistance safety net, social determinants of health disparities, and other issues affecting low-income families and communities. Before joining Urban, Waxman was vice president for research and nutrition at Feeding America, where she oversaw research on food insecurity, the intersection of hunger and health, and the circumstances and experiences of individuals seeking charitable food assistance. She

also helped develop community-based intervention models to address the needs of low-income, food-insecure families, and she has collaborated with many organizations, including the Vermont Food Bank. Additionally, Waxman is a member of the Feeding America Technical Advisory Group, an adviser to the national food and agricultural policy forum Agree, and a member of the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Food Insecurity and Health Care Expenditures. She holds an MPP and a PhD from the University of Chicago, where she is a lecturer.

STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

The Urban Institute strives to meet the highest standards of integrity and quality in its research and analyses and in the evidence-based policy recommendations offered by its researchers and experts. We believe that operating consistent with the values of independence, rigor, and transparency is essential to maintaining those standards. As an organization, the Urban Institute does not take positions on issues, but it does empower and support its experts in sharing their own evidence-based views and policy recommendations that have been shaped by scholarship. Funders do not determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts. Urban scholars and experts are expected to be objective and follow the evidence wherever it may lead.



2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

www.urban.org