

Food Deserts and Food Insecurity in West Virginia

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This Science and Technology Note addresses food insecurity in West Virginia and discusses options for improving food access.

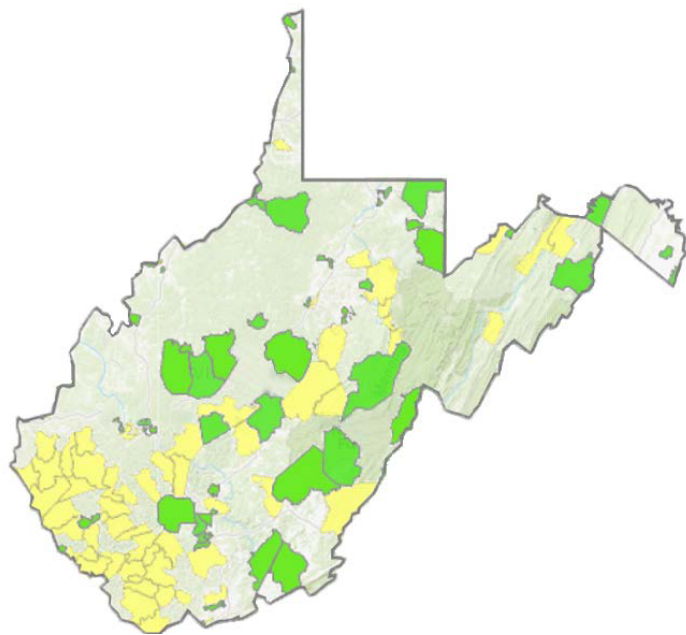
Food Insecurity in West Virginia

West Virginia has the greatest rate of food insecurity in the country, affecting over [15%](#) of the population (about 269,250 West Virginians). About [6%](#) (107,700 West Virginians) have very low food security, where there are multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. [Food deserts](#)—areas of high poverty with limited access to healthy foods—are one reason for this [food insecurity](#). Lack of private or public transportation to supermarkets is a contributing factor.

What are Food Deserts?

The [USDA](#) defines a food desert as a region that meets both of the following criteria:

- At least 33% of the population residing more than one mile (urban areas) or more than 10 miles (rural



Source: [USDA Food Research Atlas, 2019 data](#)

Research Highlights

- West Virginia has the highest rate of food insecurity in the country.
- Framing the problem as “food deserts” (accessibility) does not account for the quality of the food that is accessible.
- Not all West Virginians who qualify for food assistance programs participate.

areas) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store

- A local poverty rate of 20% or the median family earnings being 80% or less of the neighborhood’s average family salary

West Virginia food deserts are shown in green in the map to the left.

Challenges in Addressing West Virginia’s Food Deserts

West Virginians face income and geographic challenges to purchasing healthy food near their homes and securing transportation to it. As a result, grocers considering locating stores in rural West Virginia face challenges due to constrained revenue prospects.

Income challenges:

- In 2022, West Virginians’ average income per capita ranked [2nd lowest in the United States](#) at \$49,169; the national average is \$63,442.
- In 2019, 16% of West Virginians earned below the poverty level, and [33% below 185% of the poverty level](#).

Geographic challenges:

- Approximately [50%](#) of West Virginians live in rural areas, compared to the national average of about [20%](#).
- Rural residents live farther distances to public services than those in urban areas and have less access to public transportation.

Addressing Food Deserts in West Virginia

Federal funding for food assistance programs in West Virginia:

- In 2022, federal funding from the USDA for food assistance in West Virginia exceeded \$900 million. This funding mostly supported the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([SNAP](#)) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children ([WIC](#)).
- Despite high rates of SNAP participation in WV ([89%](#) of those eligible in 2018), SNAP benefits are [rarely sufficient to cover the cost of food, especially in rural areas](#).
- In 2022 West Virginians' participation in WIC was low ([46%](#) of those eligible) compared to the national average ([50%](#)).
- West Virginia State University (WVSU) operates the federally funded [Expanded Food & Nutrition Education Program \(EFNEP\)](#) but only have staff in two counties: Kanawha and Putnam Counties

Non-profit food assistance programs:

- [WV FOODLINK](#) offers planning resources to assist counties in West Virginia to improve food security.
- [The WV Food and Farm Coalition](#) offers federal grant assistance.

West Virginia state support for food assistance programs:

- The governor has allocated [\\$1 million](#) in assistance to charitable organizations (e.g., food banks) in recent years .
- Under the [West Virginia Feed to Achieve Act](#), the West Virginia Department of Education Office of Child Nutrition ensures all school aged children have access to meals during and outside of the school day.
- [WVU extension](#) and [WVSU extension](#) have several nutrition program initiatives to support [family nutrition and food preservation](#) education, [small farm](#) and [community garden](#) programs to increase local food supply, and others.

In West Virginia, 208,720 people are facing hunger and 50,680 of them are children.


1 in 9 people face
hunger

1 in 7
children
face hunger

West Virginians are estimated to need

\$115,771,000

more per year to address food needs

Image adapted from: Feeding America

Source: [Feeding America](#)

Other initiatives in West Virginia:

- [West Virginia University Center for Resilient Communities](#) led a [proposal](#) for an Office of Community Food in the West Virginia state government.

Responses by Other Appalachian States

The Healthy Food for Ohio ([HFFO](#)) program is a private-public collaboration that offers loans and flexible financing for food-related projects. The program raised about \$10 million, including \$2 million from the state to put grocers in food deserts.

Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky have enacted legislation to increase accessibility to nutritious foods through [farmers markets](#) or [school meal programs](#).