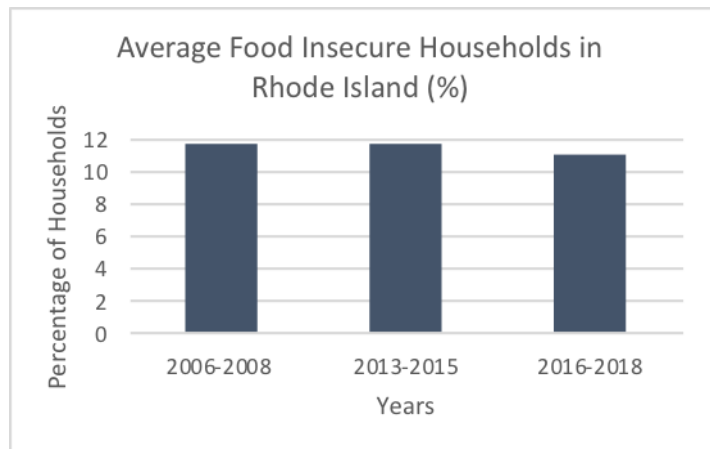




## THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY IN RHODE ISLAND

Food insecurity is a widespread problem in Rhode Island which has many negative effects on individuals and families' health and well-being. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as reduced or irregular food consumption due to lack of money or resources. Food insecurity is a multifaceted issue which often stems from poverty. It is considered one of the many overlapping issues which impact low-income families, including: lack of affordable housing, barriers to accessing healthcare, low wages and social isolation [1]. In Rhode Island, there are approximately 131,393 individuals living in poverty. This is comparable to a 12.2 percent poverty rate; in children this number rises to 16.6 percent. It is estimated that 11% (47,700) of Rhode Island households are food insecure [2]. Adults living in food insecure households often have poor dietary intake, putting them at higher risk for chronic disease. They are also more likely to have difficulty managing diet-related health conditions, exacerbating existing conditions. Food insecurity can be especially detrimental in children, resulting both short and long-term consequences related to behavioral development, educational performance, and mental and physical health [3]. It also negatively impacts the state's economy through decreased productivity and higher health care costs. The health care costs related to food insecurity equal \$160 million per year in Rhode Island [4].



**Barriers to food Access:** Environment is an important determinant of an individual's food access and risk for diet-related disease. The term "food desert" is used to describe geographic areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food options. Food deserts are typically found in regions with a high proportion of low-income residents, inadequate public transportation systems, and a lack of food retailers providing fresh produce at an affordable price [5]. In 2009, a report by the USDA found that 23.5 million people live in low-income areas further than one mile from a large grocery store [6]. This presents a major challenge for people with disabilities, frail older adults or those who don't own a car. In low-income urban communities, there is typically a higher volume of food sources such as fast food restaurants and convenience stores than there are larger retail stores with a selection of healthy fresh food options. The low-cost and convenient nature of these food options which are highly-processed and lacking in nutritional value perpetuates the increased rates of obesity and other diet-related conditions experienced in these areas.

**Vulnerable Populations:** Our state's most vulnerable citizens are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. Many studies have documented how low-income communities, particularly those that are predominantly African American, have more limited access to healthy food than high-income white communities [7]. Even after utilizing food pantries and other food assistance programs low-income Rhode Islanders miss 11 million meals each year [4]. About 66% of the households served at Rhode Island food pantries include seniors and/or children [2]. Living in a food insecure household can have lasting effects on children's academic and social development as well as stunted growth, anemia and asthma, and oral health problems [3]. Food insecurity is also prevalent among older adults, a population which is growing rapidly at the national level. There is a need to

protect older adults from becoming food insecure, as it may contribute to higher risks of chronic disease, frailty, disability, and lower quality of life.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program:** A number of federal food assistance programs are in place to ameliorate the problem of food insecurity by helping low-income families afford healthy and adequate food. The largest of these programs is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides benefits to families and individuals via an Electronic Benefits Card. Approximately 149,000 people in Rhode Island are enrolled in SNAP. Of all Rhode Island households receiving SNAP, 29.0% have children [1]. SNAP is a crucial resource for low-income families, many of which include of adults who work full-time and struggle to afford basic necessities. While there is extensive evidence to support the positive impact that SNAP has had on combating food insecurity, the struggle to access adequate healthy food to meet nutrition needs in persists. The average cost of a meal in Rhode Island is \$3.23 [1]. The average SNAP recipient receives about \$1.40 per meal [8]. This gap is shown through the large numbers of people turning to food pantries for help. The Rhode Island Food Bank reports that 53,000 individuals each month receive a meal from its food pantry network. The need for food assistance at both national and state levels remains high. Yet the Trump Administration's proposed policy changes which will result in 11,000 Rhode Islanders, including 5,000 children, losing their SNAP benefits [4].

**Efforts to Combat Food Insecurity:** Rhode Island's first comprehensive Food Strategy was launched in May 2017 by Governor Gina Raimondo. Ensuring food security for Rhode Islanders was declared one of the Strategy's five main focus areas. To address this area, the following priority actions were developed: (1) Create a hunger task force to lead efforts to reduce food insecurity to 10 percent by 2020, (2) Maximize participation in federal meal programs, (3) Reduce transportation barriers to food access, (4) Reduce the price & increase access to healthful foods across the state, (5) Support development of community gardens, (5) Continue to promote high levels of health and nutrition in our public schools & daycare facilities, and (6) Encourage healthy workplaces. The Strategy highlights that supporting and expanding upon existing SNAP programs in Rhode Island is an effective means to reducing food insecurity. The two programs focused on increasing the buying power of SNAP dollars for fruit and vegetable purchases which currently exist in the state are the Rhode Island Public Health Institute's Food on the Move Program and Farm Fresh Rhode Island's Bonus Bucks. Both of these programs have demonstrated success in increasing fresh produce purchase for SNAP recipients. Rhode Island is currently exploring how these programs' designs can be expanded to have a greater impact on food security and improved health outcomes throughout the state.

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