

Issue Brief

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Food Hardship and Nutrition Insecurity in Rural Areas with Access to Non-Congregate Summer Meals

Key findings among households living near rural non-congregate summer meals sites

- About half of households experienced food hardship in 2025.
- Thirty percent of these households reported child food hardship, indicating substantial unmet need among children.
- Food hardship was most prevalent among lower-income households, but more than twenty-five percent households with incomes above 250 percent of the federal poverty level were also affected.
- Nearly 40 percent of households experienced nutrition insecurity.
- The cost of healthy food was the most commonly reported barrier to nutrition security.

Federal summer nutrition programs operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service help households meet children's nutrition needs when school meals are unavailable. In rural areas with limited access to traditional congregate meals, the non-congregate summer meals option (also known as SUN Meals To-Go) allows sites to provide free meals and groceries that can be taken off-site, including curbside pickup, mobile route distribution, or home delivery.ⁱ This brief examines food hardship and nutrition insecurity among households living near open sites—where meals are available to all children living in the area—that operated this option in summer 2025.ⁱⁱ It provides new evidence on unmet need in communities with access to the rural non-congregate summer meals option.

Food Hardship Among Households Living Near Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meals Sites

About half of households (52 percent) living near rural non-congregate summer meals sites experienced food hardship in 2025, and 30 percent reported child food hardship—indicating substantial unmet need for food. By comparison, 14 percent of U.S. households experienced food insecurity at some point in 2024, with higher rates among households with children (18 percent) and those in rural areas (16 percent); an estimated 9 percent of children lived in food insecure households.ⁱⁱⁱ As described in the methods section, the food hardship measures used in this study are abbreviated screeners aligned with USDA food insecurity measures and are expected to produce somewhat higher prevalence estimates. Even accounting for this difference, both household and child food hardship among households living near rural non-congregate meals sites were substantially elevated relative to national benchmarks.

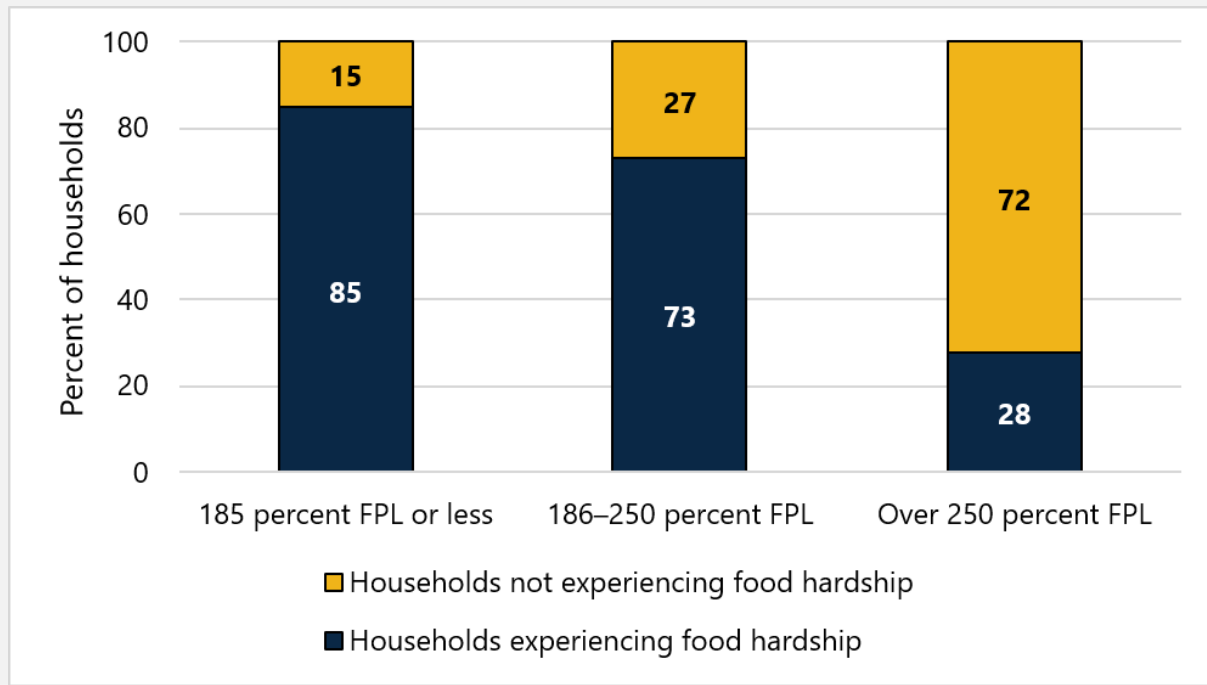
Key definitions

- **Food security** means access by all people in a household at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Food hardship** means a household has trouble affording enough food. It includes worrying that food will run out before there is money to buy more, or finding that food does not last and there is not enough money to get more.^{iv}
- **Nutrition security** is consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent and, if needed, treat disease.^{vvi}

Across income levels, food hardship was most prevalent among households with incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL)—the eligibility threshold for free or reduced-price school meals—where 85 percent experienced food hardship (Exhibit 1). Additionally, almost three quarters (73 percent) of households with incomes between 186–250 percent of the FPL experienced food hardship. However, food hardship was not limited to lower-income households: 28 percent of households with

incomes above 250 percent of the FPL experienced food hardship in 2025. These findings indicate that food hardship is widespread among households living near rural non-congregate summer meals sites and extends beyond those with the lowest incomes.

Exhibit 1. Prevalence of household food hardship by income level in 2025



Source: Tabulations of data from the Summer 2025 Rural Non-Congregate Caregiver Survey data.

Note: n = 1,239 households that provided FPL and food hardship status. Estimates are weighted to be nationally representative of households within a 15-mile radius of an open summer meals site in 2025, as reported on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Summer Meals for Kids Site Finder on July 15, 2025.

FPL = Federal Poverty Level.

Nutrition Insecurity Among Households Living Near Rural Non-Congregate Summer Meals Sites

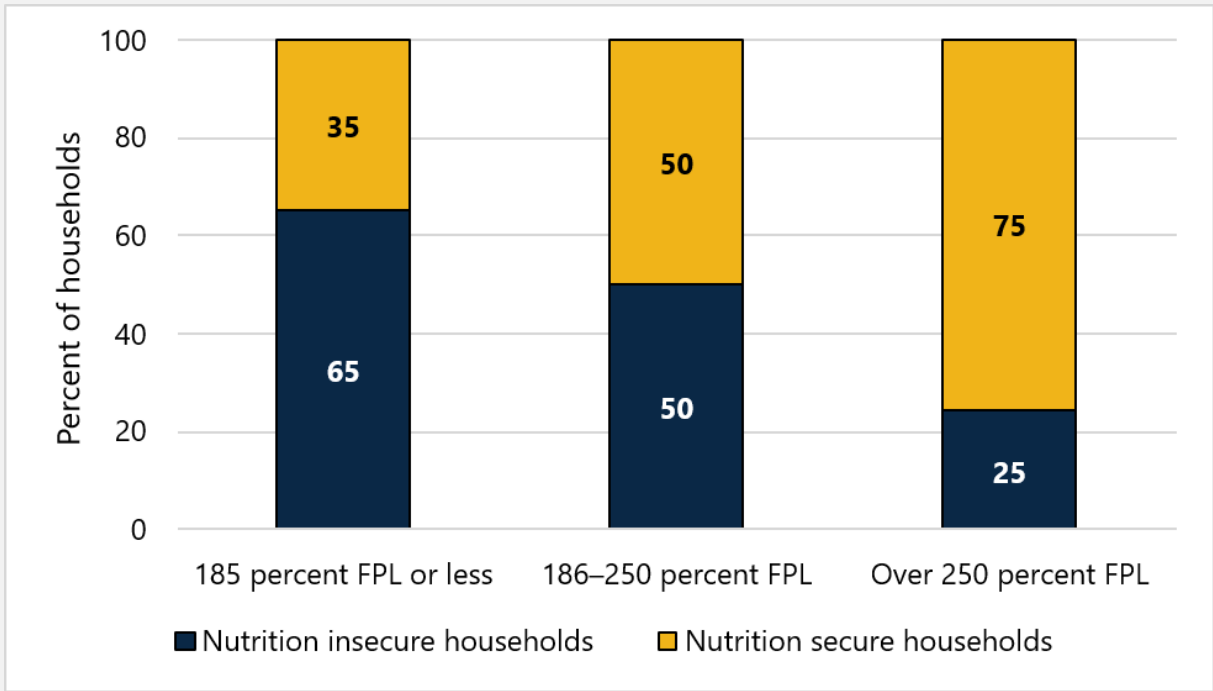
Overall, 39 percent of households living near rural non-congregate summer meals sites were nutrition insecure in 2025: 27 percent had low nutrition security, and 11 percent had very low nutrition security.¹ Low and very low nutrition security are based on the reported level of difficulty obtaining and eating healthy foods.^v

Nutrition insecurity was most prevalent among lower-income households. Sixty-five percent of households with incomes at or below 185 percent of the FPL were nutrition insecure, and 50 percent of households with incomes between 186–250 percent of the FPL were nutrition insecure (Exhibit 2). Additionally, 25 percent of households with incomes above 250 percent of the FPL were nutrition insecure.

These findings show that nutrition insecurity is more prevalent among lower-income households but also affects some middle- and higher-income households, and that challenges accessing affordable, nutritious food extend populations typically eligible for food assistance programs.

¹ The percentage of households with low and very low nutrition security do not sum to the total 39 percent of households with nutrition insecurity due to rounding.

Exhibit 2. Prevalence of nutrition insecurity by household income in 2025



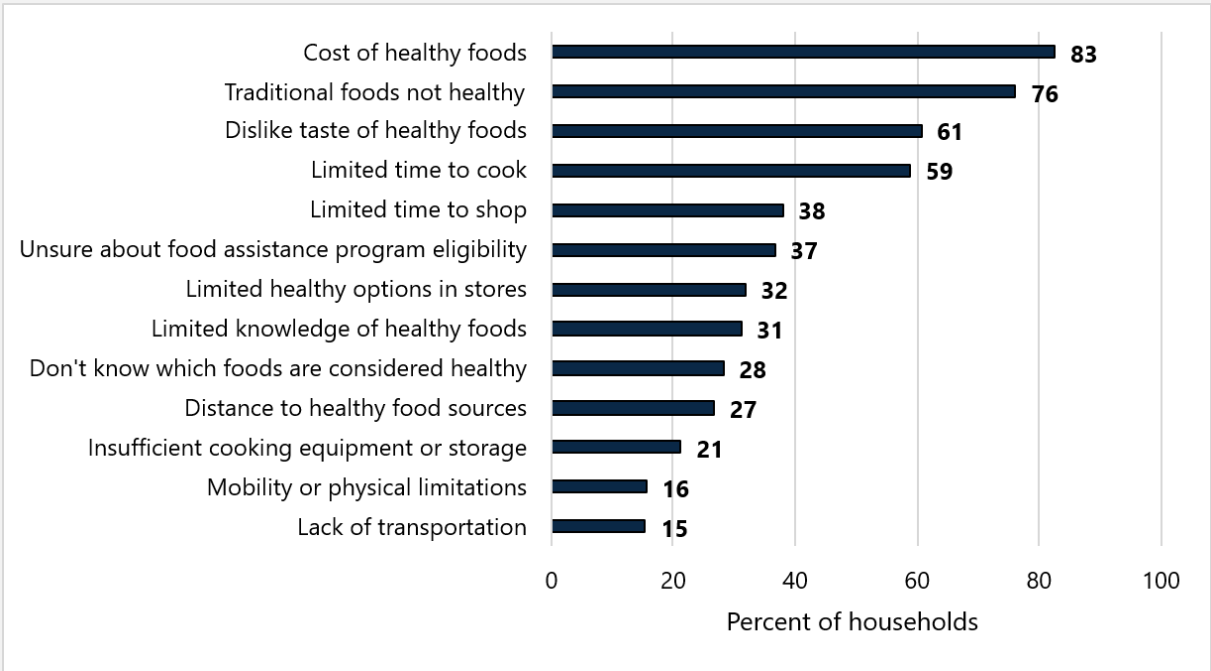
Source: Tabulations of data from the Summer 2025 Rural Non-Congregate Caregiver Survey data.
Note: n = 1,242 households that provided FPL and nutrition security status. Estimates are weighted to be nationally representative of households within a 15-mile radius of an open summer meals site in 2025, as reported on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Summer Meals for Kids Site Finder on July 15, 2025.
FPL = Federal Poverty Level.

Households reported a range of barriers to achieving nutrition security, with economic constraints emerging as the dominant challenge. The cost of healthy food was the most commonly cited barrier, reported as often or sometimes a barrier by 83 percent of households (Exhibit 3).

In addition to cost, household preferences and time constraints were also widely reported barriers. About three-quarters of households (76 percent) indicated that some of their traditional foods are not very healthy, and 61 percent reported that household members do not like the taste of healthy foods. Time was also a significant constraint, with 59 percent of households reporting that they do not have enough time to cook healthy foods.

In contrast, relatively few households reported structural or access-related barriers to nutrition security. Most households did not identify transportation, distance to food retailers or pantries, lack of cooking equipment or storage, or limited knowledge about healthy foods as barriers. This suggests that healthy foods are generally available and physically accessible in these communities, but remain financially or practically out of reach for many households. Improving nutrition security in rural areas may therefore require addressing affordability, convenience, and household preferences.

Exhibit 3. Barriers to nutrition security among households living near rural non-congregate summer meals sites in 2025



Source: Tabulations of data from the Summer 2025 Rural Non-Congregate Caregiver Survey data.

Note: n = 1,248. Estimates reflect the share of households reporting each barrier as *sometimes* or *often* true; responses of *never true* are not shown. Estimates are weighted to be nationally representative of households within a 15-mile radius of an open summer meals site in 2025, as reported on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service Summer Meals for Kids Site Finder on July 15, 2025.

Summary and Conclusions

Food hardship and nutrition insecurity were widespread among households living near rural non-congregate meals sites, and child food hardship was present in many households. Although these challenges were most prevalent among lower-income households, many households with incomes above 250 percent of the FPL were also affected. This suggests that economic strain extends beyond populations typically eligible for food assistance and highlights the importance of open-access meals sites over the summer. The cost of food was the primary barrier to maintaining a nutritious diet, with additional constraints related to time, taste, and cultural preferences. In contrast, relatively few households reported barriers related to transportation, access, equipment, or knowledge.

These patterns indicate that strategies to improve food access and nutrition security in rural areas must be broadly accessible and designed to reduce both financial and practical barriers. Approaches that lower the cost of healthy foods while also addressing convenience and household preferences may be particularly effective. Rural non-congregate summer meals are well positioned to meet these needs by providing accessible, no-cost, and flexible meal options that reduce both financial and time burdens for households.

Survey methods

Share Our Strength contracted with Mathematica to conduct an online survey of caregivers in households living within a 15-mile radius of an open rural non-congregate summer meals site; NORC fielded the survey as a subcontractor. Data were collected in December 2025 and January 2026. Open meals sites are located in areas where at least 50 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Any child can receive a free meal at an open site.ⁱⁱ The sites included in the survey are those that were listed in the Summer Meals for Kids Site Finder^{vii} as of July 15, 2025. A total of 1,248 caregivers completed the survey. The survey sample was designed and weighted to be representative of U.S. households living within 15 miles of these sites.

The survey estimated the prevalence of food hardship and nutrition insecurity among households with children ages 18 and younger and examined experiences with the rural non-congregate summer meal program option. A full summary of findings and methods is available [here](#).

Measuring food hardship and nutrition security

We measured food hardship using two-item screening questions with a 12-month recall period aligned with USDA's food security scale, including separate indicators for household and child food hardship.^{viii} Because these abbreviated screeners are less comprehensive than the full USDA measure, we use the term food hardship and expect higher prevalence estimates.^{iv} Estimates may also exceed national levels because the sample is drawn from households living in rural areas near open summer meals sites, in which socioeconomic need is higher.

Nutrition security complements food hardship by capturing the quality of diets, not just access to food. Because food insecurity is associated with poorer diet quality and higher risk of diet-related disease, measuring nutrition security provides important additional insight.^{iii,vi} There is not yet a single agreed-upon measure of nutrition security. This survey used a validated two-item screener to classify households as nutrition secure or experiencing low or very low nutrition security.^{iv} The survey also asked respondents about barriers to obtaining and eating healthy foods during the past 12 months. The question text and response options are shown below.

Survey question: People have different reasons for eating or not eating healthy foods. Please select which, if any, of the following reasons were true for you or your household in the last 12 months. [Response options: Often true; Sometimes true; Never true]^{iv}

1. Healthy foods are too expensive.
2. There aren't a lot of healthy food choices at the stores where I usually shop.

3. Stores or food pantries with healthy foods are too far away or hard to reach.
4. I don't have a car or other transportation to reach stores or food pantries that have healthy foods.
5. I don't have enough time to shop for healthy foods.
6. I don't have enough time to cook healthy foods.
7. My cooking equipment or storage space is not enough to prepare healthy foods.
8. I don't know how to cook healthy foods.
9. I don't know which foods are considered healthy foods.
10. I or others in my family don't like the taste of healthy foods.
11. Some of the traditional foods in my family are not very healthy.
12. I'm not sure I qualify for food assistance programs like food stamps (also known as SNAP or EBT) or WIC that help me buy healthy foods.
13. I have mobility challenges or physical limitations that make it difficult for me to prepare and eat healthy foods.
14. Other, please specify.

Suggested Citation

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