

Facts about Global Hunger

compiled by Seeds staff

Editor's note: Global hunger levels have been increasing since 2014. Last year the UN development agencies, along with many other humanitarian groups, predicted that the pandemic would increase the number of food insecure and outright hungry people by millions. They were right.

The number of people living with food insecurity around the world—or those forced to compromise on food quantity or quality—increased by 318 million in 2020, to 2.38 billion. (See the definitions on this page.)

–UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Washington Post*, Devex Newswire

According to the 2021 State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, the United Nations hunger report, **hunger** refers to periods when populations experience **severe food insecurity**. That means that people **go for entire days** without eating because of lack of money, or lack of access to food or other resources. Global hunger increased by 118 million people worldwide in 2020. That number is now 768 million. FAO says that this is the largest number of people in this category since 2006. –FAO, *Washington Post*, Action against Hunger

The number of people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2020 increased in every region of the world, according to the UN Hunger Report, which was released at press time. In Africa, 46 million more people experienced hunger than in 2019. That number was 57 million in

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Hunger Terms

1. **HUNGER** is the distress associated with lack of food. The threshold for food deprivation, or undernourishment, is fewer than 1,800 calories per day. When we speak of people around the world who are hungry, we are referring to people who go for entire days without food.

–United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization

2. **FOOD INSECURITY** relates to food availability, access and utilization. When people don't always have adequate availability and access to enough safe and nutritious food to maintain an active and healthy life, they are considered food insecure.

–Action against Hunger

3. **MALNUTRITION** refers to deficiencies or excesses in nutrient intake, imbalance of essential nutrients or impaired nutrient utilization. This includes undernutrition, obesity and diet-related noncommunicable diseases.

–World Health Organization

4. **UNDERNUTRITION** manifests in four broad forms: wasting, stunting, underweight, and micronutrient deficiencies.

- **WASTING** is defined as low weight-for-height. It often indicates recent and severe weight loss, although it can also persist for a long time. It usually occurs when a person has not had food of adequate quality and quantity and/or they have had frequent or prolonged illnesses. Wasting in children is associated with a higher risk of death if not treated properly.

- **STUNTING** is defined as low height-for-age. It is the result of chronic or recurrent undernutrition, usually associated with poverty, poor maternal health and nutrition, frequent illness and/or inappropriate feeding and care in early life. Stunting prevents children from reaching their physical and cognitive potential.

- **UNDERWEIGHT** is defined as low weight-for-age. A child who is underweight may be stunted, wasted or both.

- **MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES** are a lack of vitamins and minerals that are essential for body functions such as producing enzymes, hormones and other substances needed for growth and development.

–World Health Organization

Note: A person who is food insecure is at risk for all of these conditions.

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Asia, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, 14 million. Nearly 12 percent of the global population faced severe food insecurity last year.

–UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Devex Newswire

Small farmers, herders, and fishermen produce about 70 percent of the global food supply, yet they are especially vulnerable to food insecurity—poverty and hunger are most acute among rural populations.

–Action against Hunger

In 2015, the UN country members selected 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the first of which was to eliminate poverty, and the second of which was to eliminate hunger. These goals were to be reached by 2030. However, this year the UN predicts that 30 million more people will be hungry in 2030 than would have been had the coronavirus pandemic not occurred.

–FAO, Devex Newswire

According to the FAO, it would take an additional \$14 billion a year to prevent chronic undernourishment for 100 million people by 2030. It would take almost triple that amount to achieve the UN’s goal of zero hunger by 2030.

—FAO, Devex Newswire

The food security gender gap also increased in 2020: In 2019, women were 6 percent more likely than men to experience moderate to severe food insecurity; now that number is 10 percent.

–FA, Devex Newswire

In addition to job loss and lockdown-related measures impacting people’s access to food in 2020, other factors such as the closure of schools particularly affected children. Millions of children did not receive the breakfast or lunch they used to eat at school.

–FAO, Devex Newswire

In 2020, more than 149 million children under 5 were stunted, more than 45 million were suffering from wasting, and nearly 39 million overweight, according to report estimates. These are estimated figures; actual figures are expected to be even higher.

–FAO, Devex Newswire

An estimated 14 million children under the age of five worldwide suffer from severe acute malnutrition, also known as severe wasting, yet only 25 percent of acutely malnourished children have access to lifesaving treatment.

–Action against Hunger

There is more than enough food produced in the world to feed everyone on the planet.

–Action against Hunger

Armed conflict is a cause and consequence of hunger. In 2020, conflict was the primary driver of hunger for 99.1 million people in 23 countries.

–Action against Hunger

Undernutrition is responsible for 45 percent of child deaths worldwide.

–World Health Organization

Since the coronavirus pandemic began in 2020, more than two-thirds of the world’s countries have introduced national distance learning platforms, but among low-income countries the share is only 30 percent. Also, distance learning affects 368.5 million children across 143 countries who normally rely on school meals for a reliable food source.

–UNICEF

Note: Much of the analysis in this list from the UN Hunger Report and the FAO comes from Teresa Welch, who writes for Devex Newswire, an independent news organization with some 100 staff members in Barcelona, London, Manila, and Washington, DC. Devex reporting shows particular attention to global relief and development agencies and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.



art by Sharon R. Rollins

Facts about US Hunger

compiled by Seeds staff

Feeding America, the largest food-bank network in the US, recently issued a detailed report, *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 and 2021*. The report says that one of the results of the spread of COVID-19 since early 2020 was “an economic recession that ended years of declining rates of food insecurity.” The report defines food insecurity as “the lack of access to sufficient food because of limited financial resources.” It includes five key findings:

1. The report projects that 42 million people (one in eight), including 13 million children (one in six), are likely to experience food insecurity in 2021.
2. This is a slight improvement from updated 2020 projections (45 million people and 15 million children).
3. Many people who have been most impacted by the pandemic were food insecure or at risk of food insecurity before the pandemic and are facing greater hardship since it began.
4. Significant racial disparities in food insecurity that existed before the pandemic remain in its wake. The report projects that 21 percent of Black individuals (one in five) are likely to experience food insecurity in 2021, compared to 11 percent of white individuals (one in nine).
5. It will likely take a significant amount of time for food insecurity levels to recover.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of food insecurity in the United States had been declining during the longest economic expansion in the country’s history. The percentage of households that were food insecure for at least some portion of the year had dropped from 14.9 percent in 2011 to 10.5 percent in 2019. However, since the beginning of

the pandemic, the number of food insecure people has risen significantly.

–*Christian Science Monitor*, US Department of Agriculture

In the past two years, food insecurity has been at the highest level since annual records began in the mid-1990s, including after the Great Recession.

–*The Guardian*, US Census Bureau, Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research

Before the pandemic, more than 35 million Americans lived in households that struggled against hunger. One in ten (10.5 percent) of households in the US experienced food insecurity. One in eight households with children could not buy enough food for their families.

–Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

Households in rural areas experience considerably deeper struggles with hunger compared to those in metro areas, with higher rates of food insecurity overall (12.1 percent compared to 10.3 percent).

–FRAC

The food insecurity rate for households with children (14.5 percent in 2021) is considerably higher than the rate for households without children (9.3 percent before the pandemic).

–FRAC

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The food insecurity rate is highest in the South, followed by the Midwest, West, and Northeast.
–FRAC

The prevalence of food insecurity varied considerably by state, ranging from 6.6 percent in New Hampshire to 15.7 percent in Mississippi (for the three-year period before the pandemic).
–FRAC

New analysis from the US Census Bureau suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a racial inequity in US food security, leaving millions more children of color without enough to eat and threatens the long-term prospects of an entire generation.
–*The Guardian*, US Census Bureau, Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research

Child hunger was a crisis long before the COVID-19 pandemic—and it has only worsened since. Widespread school and child-care closures have left millions of children without reliable access to affordable meals, while record job losses have made it even harder for families to keep food on the table at home.
–Children’s Defense Fund

Child hunger is reaching dangerous new heights. As of February 2021, more than one in seven adults with

children (14.5 percent) reported that their children were not getting enough to eat—more than five times the pre-pandemic rate (3 percent).
–Children’s Defense Fund

Due to historic and systemic racism, children of color are going hungry at even higher rates. As of February 2021, more than one in five Black and Hispanic adults with children (22.8 percent and 20.6 percent, respectively) said their households were not getting enough to eat, compared with one in 10 white adults with children (10.4 percent).
–Children’s Defense Fund

If unemployment and poverty rates remain elevated, as many as one in four children—18 million in total—could be at risk of going hungry as a result of COVID-19. Without continued and expanded nutrition assistance during the pandemic and beyond, rising child hunger will devastate our children’s development and community success for years to come.
–Children’s Defense Fund

Consumer food prices increased significantly last year, while some of the world’s biggest food companies saw profits rise.
–*The Guardian*, US Bureau of Labor Statistics

In the week before Christmas 2020, about 81 million Americans experienced food insecurity, meaning that one in four people in the so-called richest country in the world did not have reliable access to sufficient nutritious food needed for a healthy active life. In that week, while the Trump administration

stalled the signing of the third COVID relief package, an estimated 45 million Americans reported not having enough to eat.
–*The Guardian*, US Census Bureau, Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research

Editor’s note: For an in-depth look at hunger in the US, see the Christian Science Monitor series, beginning with “Who’s hungry in America? The pandemic has changed the answer,” released in March.

Who is my neighbor? This may be the most important question we can ask, a matter of life or death for us, and our planet. That great image of Gerard Manley Hopkins: “The Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” only works for me when I consider it as including all the world—as in an astronaut’s view of it—and not just my small portion.

–Kathleen Norris,
Amazing Grace

