

Americans' Views on Hunger

Report of Findings from a National Survey
**By Hart Research Associates and
Chesapeake Beach Consulting**

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Conducted on Behalf of:

Tyson Foods and the Food Research and Action Center

Hart Research Associates and Chesapeake Beach Consulting have conducted a major survey on the issue of hunger in America on behalf of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) and Tyson Foods. The survey follows up on research the two organizations commissioned in 2011. A total of 1,558 adults across the United States age 18 and over were interviewed online from July 29 to August 6, 2014. The margin of error for the survey is ± 3.1 percentage points for the full sample, with higher tolerances for subpopulations within the sample.¹

The current survey tracks Americans' understanding of the hunger problem in America along several dimensions, while providing a new exploration of the public's commitment to taking action against hunger. This includes a deep look at the issue of federal child nutrition programs.

This report outlines the key findings that emerge from the research, and organizes the findings into four broad categories—general attitudes about hunger, personal interaction with hunger issues, opinions about hunger policy, and child nutrition.

General Attitudes toward Hunger in the United States

■ **Hunger in the United States is widely seen as a serious problem that must be addressed. It is perceived to be a problem particularly at the national level rather than the local level.**

Nearly half (45%) of adults say that hunger in “the United States at large” is a serious problem². Lower-socioeconomic-status adults are more apt to identify hunger as this serious a problem—non-college graduates (48%) are more likely to cite it as a serious problem than are college graduates (38%); the same is true for 18- to 64-year-olds with incomes under \$40,000 (48% serious problem) and those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$75,000 (51%), as compared with those with incomes over \$75,000 (36%). *(Note: throughout this report, income groups are*

¹ This is an estimate for margin of error. Because the survey was not conducted among a probability sample, the exact margin of error cannot be calculated.

² Rating of seven to 10 on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “not a serious problem,” and “10” indicates “an extremely serious problem.”

among adults age 18 to 64.) These findings are underscored by the fact that four in five (82%) disagree³ with the idea that “hunger is a big problem in many third-world countries, but not here in the United States.”

There also is an appreciable gender gap on this question. Fifty-two percent (52%) of women say hunger in the United States is a serious problem, as compared with 36% of men. Indeed, white women without a college degree are more likely than any other demographic group to say hunger is a serious problem (58%).

Perception of a hunger problem declines when respondents are asked about their own state (31% serious problem), and even more when it comes to respondents’ own communities (24%). Urban residents are appreciably more likely to call hunger in their community a serious problem (31%) than are those in suburban (22%) or rural and small town (20%) areas.

■ **Americans believe that hunger is a larger problem today than it was before the recession. And large majorities of Americans continue to see evidence of hunger’s effects.**

A majority (56%) of adults say that, compared with before the recession, hunger in the United States is more of a problem now—11% say it is less so, and 33% say it is about the same. While there is little differentiation on this by income (middle-income adults are slightly more likely to say hunger is more of a problem now than are those with lower or higher incomes), there is a substantial gender gap on this question—63% of women say hunger is more of a problem now, compared with 49% of men. And among women, those over age 50 are appreciably more apt to say hunger is a greater problem now (68%) than are women under age 50 (59%).

Personal experience is a key factor on this point. About seven in 10 (69%) adults who personally have experienced hunger or know someone who has say that hunger is a greater problem now than before the recession. On the other hand, nearly half (48%) of those who do not have this type of personal experience also say hunger is worse now.

³ Rating of zero to five on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “completely disagree,” and “10” indicates “completely agree.”

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When we probe on the specific aspects of hunger and its effects, a majority of Americans say that these problems are pervasive. Indeed, two-thirds or more say that each of the effects we asked about happens in the United States today very or fairly often.

Proportions Saying Each Happens Very/Fairly Often in the United States Today

	<u>%</u>
Children eating cheap, unhealthy foods so their families can pay the rent	83
Seniors having to choose between paying for prescription drugs or paying for food	79
Seniors who are socially isolated experiencing hunger or poor nutrition	79
A family goes a whole week without fresh fruits or vegetables	77
The only healthy meal a child gets is his or her school lunch or breakfast	76
Kids going to bed without having had a healthy meal that day	76
Healthcare costs rising because of poor nutrition among people that can't afford healthier food	75
Kids going hungry in the summer because they aren't getting school lunches or breakfasts	71
Children having trouble learning in school because they are hungry	71
People running out of food toward the end of the month because food stamps or SNAP aren't enough	70
Children having to skip meals so their families can pay the rent	66
Families failing to seek food assistance because they're embarrassed to ask for it	65

More people seem to see evidence of these discrete aspects of hunger than of the “hunger problem” as a whole. This underlines the importance of the human element of this issue—Americans seem to have less appreciation for the abstract concept of “hunger” than they do for what hunger means for some people on a day-to-day basis.

■ **For most Americans, financial considerations remain at the heart of the hunger problem. But food knowledge and personal responsibility are important as well (though, as detailed later in the report, not as important as *governmental* responsibility).**

We asked respondents whether they think that lack of money or lack of knowledge about nutrition is the bigger problem when it comes to hunger problems. By nearly two to one (66% to 34%) they say that people not having enough money to afford nutritious food is the bigger program. Majorities of voters across the board take this position, regardless of their age, race, gender, education level attained, or partisan affiliation.

We also posed six possible causes of hunger to respondents, and asked how much they believe each one contributes to the problem. Two of the top three factors are financial in nature: 69% say the fact that “the cheapest foods are often the least nutritious” contributes a great deal or quite a bit to making hunger a problem today, and 61% say the same of “nutritious food is often too expensive for many low-income people.” About half (51%) believe that “even with assistance, many people still do not have enough money to buy enough food to feed themselves and their families,” and 69% think it is very or fairly difficult for low-income people to afford nutritious foods at stores in their community.

While financial considerations are the most important, most Americans feel that people’s financial and nutrition choices also play a role when it comes to hunger. Two in three (65%) say the fact that “many people spend money on unnecessary things rather than basic needs like food” contributes a great deal or quite a bit to hunger. This belief is most widely held by Republicans (80%), but majorities of independents (64%) and Democrats (54%) agree. And 50% believe that “people don’t have the necessary knowledge to buy and prepare nutritious foods.”

Personal Experiences with Hunger

■ Two in five Americans know someone who has experienced hunger in the past year, and significant rates of participation in federal food assistance programs cross all demographic lines, with substantial participation from all income levels, races, and areas of the country. The number of young people who have experienced hunger and participated in food programs is especially noteworthy.

Two in five (39%) Americans have either experienced hunger themselves in the past year, or, in most cases, personally know someone who has. And while fairly significant proportions among all major demographic groups fall into this category, it is substantially more prevalent in some groups than in others.

Proportions Who Know Someone Who Has Experienced Hunger in the Past Year	
	<u>%</u>
All adults	39
Men	38
Women	40
Age 18 to 34	48
Age 35 to 49	40
Age 50 to 64	37
Age 65/over	26
Income under \$40,000*	55
Income \$40,000 to \$75,000*	43
Income more than \$75,000*	31
Whites	36
African Americans	46
Hispanics	55
Northeast	34
South	40
Midwest	33
West	49

*Among adults age 18 to 64

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At the same time, 39% of adults or someone in their immediate family have benefited from a federal food-related program in the past couple years—food stamps/SNAP, WIC, school lunch or breakfast, or farm subsidies. SNAP benefits are used especially widely (27%).

Proportions Saying That They or an Immediate Family Member Has Benefited from a Food Program in the Past Few Years

	<u>Any Program</u> %	<u>SNAP</u> %
All adults	39	27
Men	38	26
Women	39	28
Age 18 to 34	51	38
Age 35 to 49	36	25
Age 50 to 64	41	28
Age 65/over	19	12
Income under \$40,000*	61	50
Income \$40,000 to \$75,000*	40	26
Income more than \$75,000*	31	20
Whites	32	21
African Americans	59	48
Hispanics	56	40
Northeast	35	24
South	37	26
Midwest	35	24
West	48	35
Urban	46	34
Suburban	36	26
Small town/rural area	38	23
High school graduates/less education	49	33
Some college	42	33
College graduates	26	17

*Among adults age 18 to 64

While there is again substantial variation among subgroups, the essential point is that hunger is not an issue that only touches a small and discrete segment of the population—at least 25% of nearly every major demographic subgroup has

seen themselves or an immediate family member benefit from these programs, including one in four college graduates and 38% of rural residents.

It is especially important to note that on both questions—knowing someone who has experienced hunger and benefiting from federal food programs—young adults (those under age 35, a.k.a. “Millennials”) are substantially more likely to have been recently touched by the issue of hunger. And within the Millennial population, those who are lower-income, have lower levels of educational attainment, or are racial and ethnic minorities are particularly likely to have participated or had a member of their immediate family participate in a food-related federal program in the past couple of years—more than 60% of each group have done so.

And though these questions focus on people’s experiences in the past couple of years, this issue has not disappeared with the end of the recession. One in five (22%) adults is very or fairly worried about not having enough money to put food on the table at some point in the *next* year, and this proportion is essentially unchanged from 2011, when 24% said the same. Groups within the population who have faced hunger in the past few years also are the most likely to worry about it going forward—between 28% and 33% of Hispanics, African Americans, Millennials, and adults with no more than a high school degree have this concern. And 43% of lower-income adults are worried about this, compared with 27% of middle-income and 10% of upper-income adults.

Support for Combating Hunger

■ **Americans believe that hunger is a problem that *must* be addressed, and that government has the lead responsibility to address it.**

Whatever their other opinions on the subject, Americans are clear that hunger is unacceptable. Eighty-six percent (86%) agree⁴ with the statement “in the United States of America, no one should go hungry.” This is one of the highest levels of agreement in the survey, and it crosses gender, generational, income, and partisan lines.

⁴ Rating of six to 10 on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “completely disagree,” and “10” indicates “completely agree.”

Similarly, 61% agree that “we should support and improve government-sponsored food assistance programs so that more people who are struggling can get the help they need.” Eighty-one percent (81%) of Democrats, 60% of independents, and 39% of Republicans agree with this statement.

■ **Americans continue to believe firmly that dealing with hunger is government’s responsibility, and a strong plurality (48%) believe that we should be spending more money to address the problem of hunger.**

The spirit of bipartisanship noted earlier in this report is reflected in respondents’ strong belief that government has significant responsibility for dealing with the issue of hunger in the United States.

Perceived Responsibility for Dealing with Hunger in the United States

	<u>Great Deal of Responsibility</u> %	<u>Fair Amount of Responsibility</u> %	TOTAL Great Deal/Fair Amount %
Local government	42	30	72
The federal government	47	24	71
Local nonprofit organizations, such as churches and food banks	26	31	57

As is generally the case on issues related to the role of government, there are discrepancies of opinion along party lines—more than 80% of Democrats assign responsibility to federal and local government, as do more than 70% of independents. This sentiment is much lower among Republicans, but in no way do they reject government responsibility in this area: 50% of Republicans say the federal government has a great deal or fair amount of responsibility (23% say it does not), and 53% say local government has significant responsibility (versus 16% who say not much or no responsibility).

Republicans also differ in that they are slightly more likely to put the onus on nonprofits than government—57% say nonprofits have significant responsibility (a few points higher than their government numbers), compared with 54% of independents and 58% of Democrats (much lower than those groups’ government

numbers). Americans obviously see a role for the nonprofit sector, but they reject the notion that this is primarily the job of nonprofits: 75% of respondents overall, including large majorities across the partisan spectrum, disagree⁵ with the statement “providing assistance to people experiencing hunger is a job for churches and charities, not government.”

To help government fulfill its responsibilities, a strong plurality of Americans say that we should be spending more money to address the problem of hunger—48% say we should be doing so, while 34% say we should be spending about the same amount, and just 18% say we should be spending less.

Again, there are partisan differences here, but not diametrically opposed views. A 61% majority of Democrats and a 47% plurality of independents say we should be spending more. This decreases to 33% of Republicans, but that is still higher than the 24% of Republicans who say we should be spending less. A plurality (43%) of Republicans say we should be spending the same amount that we are now.

In addition to the partisan disparities, there is a gender gap on these points, with women consistently more likely than men to see a role for government in addressing hunger and more likely to favor increasing spending in this area.

Gender Gap on Preferences for Government Involvement in Hunger

	<u>Women</u> %	<u>Men</u> %
U.S. should be spending more on hunger	51	45
Local government has significant responsibility	75	68
Federal government has significant responsibility	75	66
Nonprofits have significant responsibility	59	54

One potential explanation for Americans’ support for government involvement in addressing hunger is the fact that they see a link between hunger and a number of social problems. Majorities draw a clear, causal line between hunger and obesity, healthcare costs, and many children’s learning difficulties.

⁵ Rating of zero to five on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “completely disagree,” and “10” indicates “completely agree.”

Proportions Who Agree with Each Statement⁶

Hunger and obesity are related, because the cheapest and most convenient foods are usually the foods that contribute to people becoming obese	71%
Reducing hunger in this country would significantly reduce the amount of tax dollars we spend on healthcare	62%
Hunger is a significant reason why many children struggle in school	57%

And, again, these beliefs cross partisan lines—for instance, 55% of Republicans, 58% of independents, and 70% of Democrats agree that reducing hunger would also reduce healthcare spending.

While Americans strongly support anti-hunger efforts, not everyone is sure that eradicating hunger is an achievable goal. A 54% majority say that hunger in the United States is solvable, but a substantial minority (46%) say it is not and that hunger always will exist. There is greater optimism among some groups—57% of those under age 35 say hunger is solvable, as do 59% of lower-income adults, 59% of African Americans, and 58% of urban residents—but more than 40% of each of these groups believes there will always be hunger.

Republicans are arguably the most pessimistic group in this regard—55% say that hunger will always be here, while majorities of Democrats (59%) and independents (56%) believe that this problem can be solved. But, regardless, all three groups are in agreement on and adamant about one point: that hunger should not be a partisan issue. Eighty-one percent (81%) of Democrats, 82% of independents, and 86% of Republicans say that hunger can be approached in a bipartisan manner by *both* political parties.

⁶ Rating of six to 10 on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “completely disagree,” and “10” indicates “completely agree.”

■ **Americans' desire for government to address the issue substantially outstrips the personal responsibility they feel to do so.**

As noted, a large majority of Americans believe that government has a responsibility to deal with hunger in the United States, and a great many believe this is true of nonprofit organizations as well. But far fewer accept responsibility themselves—just 36% say that they personally have a great deal or fair amount of responsibility to help deal with hunger. Two in five (40%) say that they feel “some” responsibility to deal with the problem. One in four adults says they have “not much” or no responsibility.

Particularly surprising is how relatively undifferentiated the data is across demographic groups. Men and women, all age cohorts, and all educational attainment groups are in the mid- to high 30's on this question. Some groups are a bit more likely to feel responsibility in this area, such as lower-income adults (40%), urban residents (42%), and African Americans (49%), but none breaks the 50% mark. One of the greatest discrepancies is between those who do not know anyone who has experienced hunger in the past year (29% take personal responsibility) and those who do (46%).

At the same time, many Americans report getting personally involved in addressing hunger in limited ways. One in three (35%) has worked or volunteered at least sometimes at a food bank, church, or other food assistance organization within the past couple of years. African Americans (46%) and college graduates (42%) are the most likely to have gotten involved in this way.

And fully three in four (76%) Americans say they have donated money or food to an organization involved in providing food assistance in the past couple years. Adults with higher incomes (79%) and levels of education (80%) are more likely to say they have donated than those with lower incomes (67%) and levels of education (71%).

Attitudes toward Child Hunger and Nutrition

■ **There is wide appreciation of the positive effects that anti-hunger and nutrition programs aimed at children have in a host of areas of children’s lives—appreciation that is shared by parents and non-parents alike.**

As noted earlier, significant majorities of Americans recognize problems related to child hunger. More than four in five say it happens very or fairly often that children eat cheap, unhealthy foods so their families can pay rent (including 52% who say this happens *very* often, the highest of any scenario we asked about); 76% say it often happens that the only healthy meal a child gets is his or her school lunch or breakfast; and an equal proportion (76%) say it often happens that children go to bed without having had a healthy meal that day.

Americans believe that programs such as school meals and nutrition programs for pregnant women and infants are beneficial in many aspects of children’s lives. In each of the areas we queried, they are more likely to say that these programs make things better rather than worse or having no effect, and in most cases they say “better” by large margins. Recognition of aiding children’s ability to learn is especially high; the positive effects on childhood obesity and families’ financial security is not quite as high, though in these cases as well people are more apt than not to think programs help.

Perceived Effects That Hunger and Nutrition Programs Have on Several Aspect of Children’s Lives

	Make Things Better	Have No Effect	Make Things Worse
	%	%	%
Children’s ability to learn in school	75	18	7
Children’s health in the short term	68	19	13
Children’s health in the long term	67	21	12
Children learning to be healthy eaters	65	25	10
The amount of childhood hunger	64	19	17
The nutritional quality of the food that low-income children eat	63	22	15
Low-income families’ financial security	52	29	19
Childhood obesity	43	34	23

As is the case regarding general government involvement in hunger, Democrats are more apt than Republicans to think programs help in the areas listed above (independents fall between partisans on most items). Still, majorities of Republicans say that federal programs make things better in most of these areas, the only exceptions being financial security and obesity. Indeed, more than 60% of Republicans believe that programs make things better for both children's ability to learn and their short-term health.

At the same time, there is a substantial gender gap on most items. Majorities of each gender say "make things better" on most items, but the majorities of women are appreciably larger.

Proportions Who Say That Hunger and Nutrition Programs Make Things Better on Selected Aspects of Children's Lives

	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Children's ability to learn in school	82	67
Children's health in the short term	73	63
Children's health in the long term	74	60
Children learning to be healthy eaters	74	57
The amount of childhood hunger	73	54
The nutritional quality of the food that low-income children eat	70	55
Low-income families' financial security	58	45
Childhood obesity	48	39

It is also interesting to note two groups for whom there are *not* significant differences on this question—those who have five- to 18-year-old children and those who do not. Parents are a bit more likely to say programs help with children's learning (80%, versus 73% of non-parents), but otherwise these two groups are generally equally likely to see benefits in all these areas.

■ **Half of Americans say Congress should increase spending for child nutrition programs, with only a small proportion saying spending should be decreased. In fact, most people say it would be a very big problem if Congress were to cut funding for these kinds of programs.**

As with the hunger issue overall, Americans overwhelmingly believe that the federal government has a major role to play when it comes to ending childhood hunger. Seven in 10 (70%) say that the federal government has a great deal (45%) or fair amount (25%) of responsibility in this area.

More specifically, 50% of respondents say Congress should increase funding for programs such as school meals and nutrition programs for pregnant women and infants; 35% say funding should remain as is, and just 15% say it should be decreased.

Desire for more funding is greatest among Democrats, 71% of whom say spending should be increased. This compares to 25% of Republicans who say this; the plurality of Republicans say funding should remain the same (46%), and 29% say it should be decreased. It is worth noting that there are segments within the Republican coalition who are more likely to say that funding for these programs should be increased rather than decreased, including Republican women (29% increased, 23% decreased) and non-conservative Republicans (37% increased, 15% decreased).

Additionally, traditional political “swing” groups such as independents (48% increased), moderates (53%), and suburban women (51%) endorse greater funding in this area.

The public would, in fact, have major concerns if Congress were to cut funding for child nutrition programs—74% say it would be a very (50%) or pretty (24%) big problem if Congress did this. Large majorities of men (69%) and women (78%) feel this way, as do Democrats (91%), independents (75%), and a majority of Republicans (51%). Only 7% of Americans say it would not really be a problem.

■ **Among Americans' top priorities for child nutrition-related laws are reducing hunger, improving nutrition, and reducing childhood obesity. Reducing waste and ensuring eligibility also are important to them.**

Given the concerns that Americans express about hunger in the United States, it is perhaps unsurprising that their greatest priority for food-related laws that Congress should consider in the area of child nutrition is to reduce childhood hunger—nearly four in five say this is a high priority⁷. Indeed, this is the only priority to which the majority (54%) of adults assign the highest ratings of “9” or “10.”

By sharp contrast, by far the lowest priority on the list—at just 19%—is reducing government spending on child nutrition programs. Again, Americans are adamant that Congress should not cut funding for child nutrition programs.

Americans also believe it is important that these programs are effective and well-run. Improving the nutrition of foods that are part of child nutrition programs comes in just below reducing hunger as a priority, with 75% giving it a high rating. Also important is reducing the amount of food that gets thrown away in schools (74% high priority), and 71% say it should be a high priority to make sure that only families who are truly eligible benefit from these food programs, putting this goal on par with reducing childhood obesity (70%).

Proportions Who Rate Selected Goals for Child Nutrition Laws as High Priorities*

	<u>%</u>
Reducing childhood hunger	78
Improving the health and nutrition of foods that are part of child nutrition programs	75
Reducing waste and the amount of food that gets thrown away in schools	74
Making sure that only families who are truly eligible benefit from these programs	71
Reducing childhood obesity	70
Reducing government spending on child nutrition programs	19

*8-10 ratings on a zero-to-10 scale, 10 = very high priority

⁷ Rating of seven to 10 on a zero-to-10 scale. “0” indicates “very low priority,” and “10” indicates “very high priority.”

Finally, while the idea of government working to reduce childhood hunger is a popular idea, many of the programs that aim to do this are even more popular. We asked Americans about three child nutrition programs and found large majorities to have high regard for each one.

Feelings toward Federal Child Nutrition Programs		
	<u>Favorable</u> <u>Feelings</u> %	<u>Unfavorable</u> <u>Feelings</u> %
The school lunch program	82	17
The school breakfast program	80	17
Women, Infants, and Children, also called WIC	73	22

In an era when political partisans are at odds on many government programs, there is wide agreement on these three. More than 85% of Democrats feel favorable toward each one; 75% of independents are favorable toward WIC, and their favorable feelings exceed 80% for school lunches and breakfasts; and 71% of Republicans are favorably disposed to school lunches, 68% to school breakfasts, and 57% to WIC.