

# Food insecurity

IN  
FLORIDA



## What is food insecurity?

The World Food Summit of 1996 defined food security as existing “when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life”. Food insecurity, then, is best defined as a lack of such access. If an individual is lacking in any or all of the following three pillars, he or she is dealing with food insecurity.

### Food Availability



Having sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis

### Food Access



Having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet

### Food Use



Understanding basic nutrition and appropriately preparing and consuming food

“ As you can imagine, when you are worried about having enough money to buy food for your family, whether the food you do manage to buy is making you fat is probably not a top concern. Bad food is better than no food. ”

## Helpful Resources

Florida's Roadmap to Living Healthy (interactive map)  
<http://arcgis.com/apps/OnePane/basicviewer/index.html?appid=e012446fd84e4009a4f0d936cf450cd3>

Waste Not OC (a successful model)  
[www.wastenotOC.org](http://www.wastenotOC.org)

Disability is an Important Risk Factor for Food Insecurity (article and report)  
<http://blogs.usda.gov/2013/02/12/disability-is-an-important-risk-factor-for-food-insecurity/>

One in Seven U.S. Homes is Food Insecure (radio program)  
[www.marketplace.org/topics/your-money/one-seven-us-homes-food-insecure](http://www.marketplace.org/topics/your-money/one-seven-us-homes-food-insecure)



## Other Recommended Resources

We recommend the following resources to help you think about this critical issue.

## Websites

USDA Economic Research Service  
[www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx#.VDLlydEhCY2w](http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx#.VDLlydEhCY2w)

Feeding America  
[feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger.aspx](http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger.aspx)

World Health Organization  
[www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/](http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/)

## Readings

As the economy improves, the face of hunger does not change  
[www.tampabay.com/news/health/as-economy-improves-the-face-of-hunger-doesnt-change/2196613](http://www.tampabay.com/news/health/as-economy-improves-the-face-of-hunger-doesnt-change/2196613)

Food giveaway for low-income students  
[http://www.alligator.org/news/campus/article\\_e26213d0-3e26-11e4-b148-cb9d8aa82da3.html](http://www.alligator.org/news/campus/article_e26213d0-3e26-11e4-b148-cb9d8aa82da3.html)

Growing number of students suffering from food insecurity  
[www.redandblack.com/uganews/growing-number-of-students-suffering-from-food-insecurity-as-college/article\\_2e35f2b2-4d9b-11e4-9e17-0017a43b2370.html](http://www.redandblack.com/uganews/growing-number-of-students-suffering-from-food-insecurity-as-college/article_2e35f2b2-4d9b-11e4-9e17-0017a43b2370.html)

# **2015 Graham Civic Scholars Program | Food Insecurity in Florida's Counties**

By Michael Beato

## **Introduction**

Food insecurity affects thousands of Floridians each day. Despite its prevalence in our state, this issue does not regularly garner headlines or fill airwaves. Most Floridians have no idea what food insecurity is or the ways in which it negatively affects their health and productivity. In fact, before becoming Graham Civic Scholars, many students—myself included—could not even define food insecurity, let alone comprehend the extent to which our fellow residents are impacted by this issue. These awareness issues aside, food insecurity represents a critical problem that must be addressed. In silence, the victims of food insecurity suffer—their health deteriorates their capacity to learn declines, and their ability to contribute to society lessens. For these reasons, the Bob Graham Center for Public Service at the University of Florida dedicated time, energy, and resources to explore food insecurity in the state. Forty-eight undergraduate students were selected and sent to Florida counties to collect information and evaluate the extent and impact of food insecurity at the local level, as well as current efforts aimed at mitigating it. The scholars interviewed members of the local government, staff at charitable organizations, and the victims of food insecurity themselves. They considered the food-related policies and programs of each county and examined their effectiveness. This report synthesizes the 48 scholar reports, analyzes why food insecurity persists in the state, and explores promising solutions.

## **Background Information**

It is important to begin by defining food insecurity. This quotation from the Volusia County report provides a solid description:

Food insecurity is defined by limited or uncertain availability and access to nutritionally adequate food. Food insecurity is often compounded for individuals who have health conditions that require expensive medications. Often for these individuals, they must choose between eating and providing the proper medication for their ailments.

Food insecurity is more than simply not knowing from where your next meal will come. In fact, food insecurity may still exist when the pantry is full. Thousands of Floridians go to the grocery store each day and return with prepackaged and unhealthy foods. Their grocery bags are often devoid of the fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats that a healthy diet demands. Although they many not find themselves hungry, these individuals are among the food insecure and they are therefore vulnerable to health complications. As the Volusia County Scholar reports, food-insecure individuals are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses such as diabetes, HIV, and obesity along with developmental stunting in children and mental problems such as anxiety and depression. These afflictions are compounded for the young, the elderly, and the disabled—populations that the Graham

Civic Scholars researched in detail.

### **Analysis of Florida Counties**

After analyzing each report, an important trend emerged: county size is the most significant factor impacting food insecurity. Counties of a particular size experience similar economic systems, infrastructure, demographics, and political climate. These features contribute to the overall environment of a food-insecure Floridian. For example, in a large county, the strong economy and tax base allow the government to allocate more funds to programs that assist the food insecure. The same cannot be said for cash-strapped agricultural counties, for example. Because counties of a particular size have similar characteristics, this report describes each county as either a small county with a rural population, a medium size county with a rural population and a few large cities, or a large county with a strong economy and pockets of poorer regions, and presents them in that fashion.

### **Rural Counties**

Suwannee, Gilchrist, Baker, Dixie, Collier and DeSoto counties are examples of rural counties with small populations and agricultural economies. In these locations, dependence on agriculture does not always translate to food security. This goes against the prevailing misconception that rural counties are overflowing with freshly-picked fruits and vegetables and the belief that rural residents have robust diets. On the contrary, the farms are highly specialized, the transportation systems are inadequate, and access to fresh and unaffordable food is uncertain.

Gilchrist County, for instance, grows watermelon, peanuts, dairy, corn, cotton, soybeans, fresh vegetables, timber, and cattle. But just because a farmer grows plenty of crops, that farmer is not necessarily food secure. As the Gilchrist County Scholar reports, farmers "do not keep their crops but... [sell] them to larger corporations. Thus, it is feasible that you can find food-insecure farmers." Food insecurity persists even in thriving agricultural communities and, unfortunately, many rural counties in Florida are not thriving. These counties have high poverty rates and high rates of food insecurity. Indeed, poverty is a huge problem in rural counties. In Gadsden County, 26.5 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and 47.1 percent of children live below the poverty line. Needless to say, poverty and food insecurity often go hand-in-hand in farming communities.

Transportation in rural counties is typically inadequate. Roads are not always maintained, and many residents do not have the income to purchase their own vehicles. Reliance on buses and other modes of transportation is to be expected, but the public bus routes do not reach these wanting populations. Lacking a means of transportation leads to food insecurity, because in places like Wakulla County, a Floridian has to drive more than 25 miles to reach a grocery store. In Baker County, a person must drive 60 miles to reach such a store. Without buses or cars, rural Floridians are effectively trapped and have no access to food. When transportation is available, access to fresh

food is always in doubt. Typical of rural counties, the largest city has only a handful of grocery stores that stock fresh food.

In places where meal costs are high, residents of rural communities are forced to rely on cheap takeout and fast food. In places where meal costs are low, residents can afford to journey to higher-priced convenience stores, which far outnumber grocery stores. These stores rarely stock healthy foods, filling their shelves instead with packaged, processed food—the very food that characterizes food insecurity.

Because food insecurity is worse in rural counties, the local government and charities are working to alleviate the problem. Children in particular are a focus of much attention because they are often the most susceptible to food insecurity. In Union County, the food insecurity rate for children is 26.7 percent. In Suwannee, it's almost 38 percent. Public schools deal with this problem head on—many children in these counties are qualified for the free-meal school program, and breakfast and lunch in public schools are either free or heavily discounted. This program is successful and feeds thousands of children each school day. The kids then only have to worry about after-school, weekend, and school-break meals. The downside of this program is its limited reach: the only healthy meals a child receives are the ones he or she has at school. Nevertheless, the free-meal program works in rural counties. It is an example of a properly-enacted and widely-accepted program that assists food-insecure populations. Some schools, often with the help of local charities, take this program a step further and fill backpacks with healthy food for children. Again, the school meal program represents a successful public program.

Programs that fight food insecurity for the population at large are those executed by charities, typically religious ones. The charities are embedded in the local community and know how to serve its food insecure residents. Of course, logistical and financial restraints are prevalent in even the best charities. Nonetheless, these selfless groups provide an irreplaceable service. By comparison, local governments typically play a lesser, albeit important role in addressing food insecurity. Rural counties typically have low-wage workers and a small tax base, all of which leaves local governments with limited resources for combatting this issue.

### **Medium-Size Counties**

Medium-size counties usually have a few cities in one area and pockets of rural poverty in the other. This situation creates sort of a “tale of two counties.” Take Seminole County for example: it is made up of one section of white-collar residents and a separate section of blue-collar residents. Seminole County comprises many cities and suburbs with middle-to-upper class families in some parts and poor communities in others. In Santa Rosa County, the northern region tends to be much more rural and agrarian based, whereas the southern region is much more urban and economically stable.

The main issue for this type of county is an unequal distribution of wealth. Graham Civic Scholars noted that in medium-size counties, most economic and demographic statistics appear relatively normal. Average income levels are good, average meal costs are near the state average, and the overall economy is strong. But these statistics can be deceiving, as Sumter County illustrates: although Sumter County's food insecurity and poverty numbers are low, the Villages—"the largest gated over-55 community in the world"—accounts for about 60 percent of the population of Sumter County and brings the average-family income to over \$92,000 per household. The scholar for Sumter County explains this phenomenon, which I quote at length,

The Villages and its affluent residents have significantly boosted the economic growth of Sumter County. However, the combination of their economic and demographic data with that of the residents of the rest of the county makes it difficult to understand the real situation of food insecurity... In the words of Martha Maddox, an agent for the Family and Consumer Science extension of IFAS in Sumter County, "The Villages throw everything off." For example, Sumter County's poverty rate is less than the state's, 14.5 percent and 17.0 percent, respectively, yet their child-poverty rate is nearly 10 percent higher than that of the state (34.9 percent compared to 25.1 percent), which seems to reflect how the large number of adults from the Villages lowers the statistic of poverty for all ages. Joelle Aboytes, a community development administrator for Circuit 5 of the Florida Department of Children and Families, highlighted Sumter County's longstanding homeless population and generational poverty as persistent issues that are easy to overlook because of the skewing effect [of the Villages.] Both county officials interviewed expressed that there was a clear divide geographically, economically, and historically between the two populations: residents of the Villages and the rest of Sumter County.

Because the statistics seem better than average, community leaders are slow or simply unwilling to respond to cases of food insecurity. Further, in many medium-size counties, local governments have made it illegal to give food to panhandlers on the street, as is the case in Osceola County. Based on political ideology and a misreading of the type of statistics reviewed above, many local-government leaders believe food insecurity does not exist and that the government should not assist in alleviating this minimal issue. The burden in these medium-sized counties is therefore left to local charities.

In keeping with a "tale of two counties," transportation is not an issue in wealthier areas, but remarkably inconsistent in poorer regions. That said, the issue the entire county needs to address is education pertaining to food insecurity. Even in wealthy areas with numerous grocery stores, dietary habits are poor. Residents of the Villages in Sumter County are also at risk of food insecurity, if only because of poor decision making. In the medium-size counties that choose to invest in educational programs, the community benefits greatly. Some counties provide free cooking classes at community centers and organize other food-education programs. For a period of time, the Brevard County Kitchen served 1500 to 2000 meals per day, all of which were meals delivered through programs including Meals on Wheels, Seniors at Lunch, and United Way of Brevard. Although defunded by the local.

government—because of political opposition—and operating with fewer resources at its disposal, this program continues to operate. When it was fully funded, the Kitchen was a great example of a government program that worked.

Compared to rural counties, the issue for medium-sized counties is making the well-financed local government work for everyone. Despite the misleading statistics, food insecurity persists in all communities, affluent and poor alike. The trick is to persuade community leaders to enact positive initiatives like food-preparation classes and Brevard's County Kitchen.

### **Large Counties**

Large counties in the state have over a million residents. Specifically, Orange, Miami-Dade, Hillsborough, Broward, and Palm Beach counties fall into this category. The concerns of large counties include the high-price of food, lack of knowledge of government programs, and the reliance on low-wage workers. Large counties typically have a higher-than-average cost per meal, but have better access to well-stocked grocery stores than other counties. Given the high price of good food, it is understandable that hungry residents choose the fast, prepackaged, and processed foods that give them the most filling bang for their buck.

Compared to rural and medium-size counties, transportation and governmental services are well-funded because of the size of the tax base and number of wealthy residents. The government provides plenty of programs that help residents with food-related issues. However, social stigma remains a concern. Many young students can apply for the free-meal program at school, but choose not to because of social stigma. Education in this area would improve the lives of many.

A big problem for large counties is their reliance on low-wage workers. In Palm Beach County, low-wage earners working in the tourism and retail industries provide the foundation of the county's economy. Here, the high price of food becomes problematic. These workers make up the food insecure populations in the otherwise affluent counties. The simple fix to this problem is to advertise the services the government and local charities provide. Especially in well-financed large counties, the government and local charities have the resources available to significantly reduce the number of food-insecure Floridians. Brining about a food-secure future is more achievable than one might think.

### **Notes on Food Insecurity and the Disabled Community**

A handful of Civic Scholars were selected to be Salem Fellows, named for Mr. Richard J. Salem, a prominent lawyer and advocate for individuals with disabilities. Salem Fellows were tasked with exploring and reporting the ways in which food insecurity affects the disabled community.

The effects of food insecurity become more deleterious when a food-insecure man or woman is disabled. Resources are more limited to members of this community. As the Marion County Salem Fellow states,

For people living with disabilities in Marion County, there are three options that are available to help with food access. These options are Meals on Wheels, Marion Transit Services, and about 14 independent food pantries located throughout the county.... [Some of the programs] re not free, only have a few routes per day, and require an appointment to be made 72 hours in advanced.... If someone who is disabled is on that wait list and cannot get a service that can help them learn to prepare foods or get assistance with cooking, it can cause them to be food insecure... [Many] intellectually-disabled people are not receiving the services and assistance they need because the wait list for the Medicaid waiver is over 20,000.

Orange County has similar programs directed towards the disabled community. It uses state funds to support charities in providing services to the disabled community. Although there are federal and a few local government agencies that service the disabled community, the bulk of the work rests on private charities.

The barriers to assisting the disabled are great in number. A common barrier, as the Polk County Salem Fellow accounts, is food-preparation training: “microwaves are often the only safe option to cook food especially for the disabled people that cannot recognize the temperature difference.” Fortunately, charities make a remarkable difference in this community. Catholic charities in Polk County assist “high school graduates [with] social skills, independent living skills, and vocational training... [The] Transition program helps intellectually, socially or physically disabled students become functional adults in society.” Stride have been made in the disabled community.

### **Notes on Scholar Reports**

Regardless of the level of food insecurity or the demographic groups this issue largely affects, scholars were shocked at their county’s food insecurity rate. A rate that was below the state average received just as much surprise and scrutiny as a rate above the average. This shows that even a low level of food insecurity is unacceptable in the eyes of Millennials. The emotional response is there, and with action that stems from education and awareness, Millennials can champion this issue and strive for a food-secure future.

In terms of solving food insecurity, the scholars almost unanimously agree that food education is to be pursued. Only when Floridians understand what food insecurity is and what constitutes a healthy meal can this problem fully confronted.

Interestingly, most scholars thought that the government should lead the fight against food insecurity. In fact the government, through food-related programs, schooling, tax incentives, and initiatives should chiefly combat food insecurity and prioritize it high on its agenda. Although there is a strong nod to local charities in each report, scholars believe that the government should be the principal force in the battle against food insecurity. This ties in with the perception that Millennials want more from their government than previous generations.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, food insecurity is an underreported issue that silently affects the lives of those around us. Food insecurity can be just as prevalent in an economically-distressed rural community in Central Florida as it is in Coconut Grove or Ponte Vedra Beach. Local governments and charities work with food-insecure populations to little fanfare each day. These men and women on the frontlines cannot reach their goal of a food-secure state of Florida without proper assistance. The way to win this fight is to become aware of and informed about food insecurity. This is what the Bob Graham Center and its Civic Scholars hope to achieve. With our time, energy, and minds now focused on solutions to this problem, a food-secure future is within our grasp.