

# Tackling Food Insecurity at Its Roots

## A Data Walk Memo for Sebastian County, Arkansas

**Almost 1 in 5** Sebastian County, Arkansas, residents are food insecure. **Children face greater food insecurity than adults**; 25 percent of children live in a food insecure household.<sup>1</sup>

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**Sixteen percent of households in Sebastian County receive SNAP benefits**, compared with 13 percent in Arkansas and 13 percent in the US overall.<sup>2</sup>

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**About 18 percent** of Sebastian County residents have a disability.<sup>3</sup>

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Almost a third of residents are housing cost burdened and spend a significant portion of their income on housing and transportation. **Sebastian County residents spend 31 percent of their income on transportation.**<sup>4</sup>

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Sebastian County falls into peer group 4 in the study: **moderately high food insecure urban county with highest housing cost burden.**

According to the US Department of Agriculture, 37 million Americans in 2018 did not have reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food—also known as food insecurity.<sup>5</sup> Food insecurity can have a negative impact on the health and development of people of all ages; residents of communities with high rates of food insecurity are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health and to face economic challenges. Such consequences and intersecting hardships make addressing food insecurity complex.

In a two-phase study, the Urban Institute helped communities across the US use data to drive more effective approaches for addressing food insecurity. Sebastian County, Arkansas, is one of the six communities we visited; this memo summarizes what we learned from our conversations with residents and stakeholders.

### The State of Food Insecurity in Sebastian County

Although most residents consider Fort Smith, the county's main city, affordable compared with larger cities, many struggle to afford the cost of living. The community is grappling with the effects of factory closures and the difficulty in finding full-time, well-paying jobs. At the same time, rising housing and transportation costs add to residents' financial burdens. Although Fort Smith is considered a smaller city, transportation is a major issue that affects residents' ability to find and maintain a job. Stakeholders also identified concerns about Arkansas's limited renter protection policies that prevent low-income families from building wealth.

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*"When I think of Fort Smith, I don't think of career options. When I think of a career to settle down, I don't think of Fort Smith." – Teen Resident*

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## Roots of Food Insecurity in Sebastian County

**Limited Economic Opportunity.** Publicly available data may not fully reflect the experiences of residents. Although the unemployment rate is fairly low, unemployment data do not account for people who are underemployed or have stopped looking for work. While stakeholders agreed that everyone in Sebastian County has limited economic opportunities, African Americans are disproportionately affected—their median household income is \$19,000 less than that of white families (figure 1). Although African Americans make up about 1 in 10 residents and Latinx households make up nearly 1 in 5, stakeholders acknowledged that they may be left out of important community conversations; several stakeholders reported that they have limited connections to the African American, Latinx, and Asian American communities.

**Family Instability.** Sebastian County is facing a confluence of factors that disrupt family stability and may therefore increase food insecurity. The county has a high incarceration rate compared with the state and the nation.<sup>6</sup> Supporting someone in prison adds to a family's financial burden, and returning residents may face long-term difficulties in finding employment and getting out of poverty. Also, Sebastian County has a rapidly growing foster-care system; separating families creates instability in the family and the child's development.<sup>7</sup> Although the number of children in the formal foster care system is known, little information is available about informal foster care, grandparent-led families, and single-headed households.

**Geographic Divides.** Stakeholders, teen participants, and adult participants all referred to social and economic divides, particularly between the northern and southern sides of Fort Smith. Teen residents reported stigma and stereotyping based on where they lived and what school they attended. Adults also identified tension between the northern and southern sides of Fort Smith related to where low income and communities of color live.

Figure 2. Overall low median incomes compared with the state and nation, as well as wide disparities, make it challenging for residents to afford food, especially nutritious food.

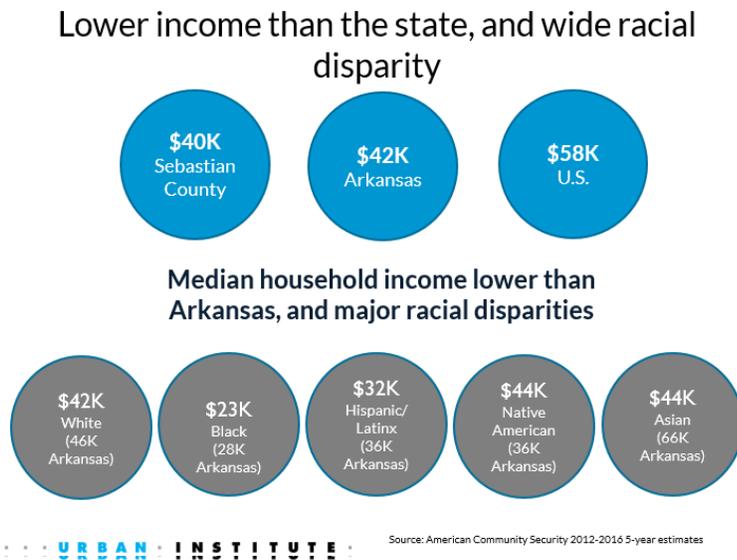
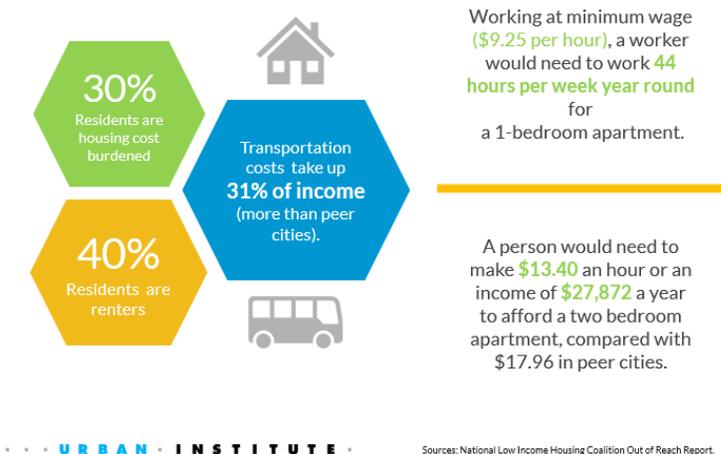


Figure 2. High housing and transportation costs mean that many residents cannot afford rent working a single minimum-wage job. Residents described transportation as a particular challenge for food access.

## High housing costs contribute to food insecurity



## YOUTH VOICES

*Teens were very perceptive about economic challenges and racial inequities in their communities. Their comments showed a strong capacity for empathy with other residents and a desire to be part of solution-building for the community.*

“Whenever I see bigger cities, it seems like there’s a lot of ‘now hiring’ signs, but you don’t see that in Fort Smith.”

“In Fort Smith, they are trying to make it better, but they mostly think about the middle class, not the lower class.”

“High-schoolers from the south side said about north-siders, ‘I bet they use EBT cards at their concessions stands,’ and they’ve said stuff about immigrants and made a song about how the KKK is going to burn our school down. It got very racist.”

“They add businesses that target the middle class and the upper class, not those at the poverty line. And that’s a lot of people in Fort Smith. You don’t necessarily see them on the street, but that doesn’t mean they’re not struggling.”

Youth recommended the following:

- Address stigmas against families who are low income and homeless
- Support community gardens
- Provide more information about available food programs
- Provide support for internet access and food costs

## Community Needs and Challenges when Accessing Food

**Transportation Burdens.** Residents identified housing costs and access to transportation as major financial burdens that affect food insecurity (figure 2). Although Fort Smith is working to expand public transportation routes and options for other modes, residents said the current public transportation system made it difficult to access jobs and grocery stores or food pantries. Public transportation is not available for people working second and third shifts, and those with physical limitations cannot use buses to transport food from food banks or supermarkets. Some residents said that bus travel was time-intensive and that transporting groceries via transit was difficult. Residents also said that because they do not have bank accounts, they cannot access alternative transportation systems such as ride-sharing services.

**Access to Holistic Health Care.** Many residents identified health care access as a trade-off to healthy food. Stakeholders said the county’s health insurance rate did not accurately reflect their experiences in the community. Residents reported that the lack of access to mental health and dental health services prevented them from finding and maintaining a job. Residents also stated that they sometimes delayed filling prescriptions so they could buy food.

**What’s Working Well.** Sebastian County has a vibrant, civically minded community. During our time in Fort Smith, we were amazed by the level of passion and dedication to the community among stakeholders and teen and adult residents. Sebastian County benefits from its relatively small size; leaders of most nonprofits know one another and can easily communicate and meet with city officials.

Holistic initiatives to address the needs of low-income families have been growing. Stakeholders pointed to the 100 Families Initiative, a program that supports families involved in the justice system, and efforts to reduce juvenile sentencing as innovative strategies to address community issues like rising foster care and incarceration rates.

**Remaining Challenges.** Even though the county has a large charitable sector, stakeholders identified multiple groups not being reached. Teen and adult residents said eradicating stigmas that affect participation in food access programs was a challenge. Stakeholders also acknowledged that encouraging companies to invest in jobs was difficult. Some adult residents noted that new jobs tend to be in areas

that are inaccessible to people with limited transportation options.

## Including More Voices

**Immigrant Populations.** Many stakeholders pointed out that the available data may not accurately reflect the immigrant population of Sebastian County. We had limited success finding advocates from immigrant communities to speak with us, and key stakeholders seem as though they are not in contact with the communities, which makes understanding needs difficult. There are concerns that undocumented immigrants may be avoiding public assistance programs for which they are eligible out of fear of deportation or jeopardizing citizenship.

**Communities of Color.** Sebastian County has sizable communities of color, including African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native American populations. However, stakeholders acknowledged the lack of representation from minority populations in positions of power and larger community conversations. Despite the significantly lower median household for black families in Sebastian County, some residents and stakeholders expressed concern that the African American community is not adequately served by charitable organizations.

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*“The questions are how we are going to bring in jobs, but we need to think about what other jobs we are going to bring in. All that comes in is more manufacturing jobs in Fort Chafee, but no one can afford to live down there.”—*

*Adult resident*

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# FIVE ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

## to Tackle Food Insecurity in Sebastian County, Arkansas

Residents and stakeholders in Sebastian County shared various challenges related to food insecurity and its root. Although many must be addressed at multiple levels, from the neighborhood to nationally, the strategies outlined here are local. To tackle food insecurity at its roots, the county can increase its understanding of the financial burdens that families face and include more actors to address the factors associated with poverty and food insecurity. Below are five actionable strategies collected from our research and the community.

### 1. Bring More Voices to the Table

We heard from teen and adult residents about the stigma attached to living in particular parts of the county. Those who lived on the northern side of Fort Smith described being stigmatized as poorer and less educated. Teens also described incidents in which they were mocked for attending schools that were considered more diverse and less affluent.

Also, low-income residents and minority residents said they felt left out of conversations about how the county invests its resources. To address food insecurity equitably, Sebastian County can evaluate its public policies<sup>8</sup> and organizational practices designed to address food insecurity to ensure that they do not further disadvantage communities of color<sup>9</sup> and to assess whether they make meaningful progress in reducing disparities (and, if not, how they can be improved).

### 2. Improve Coordination across Education Sectors

Although stakeholders acknowledged that the K-12 school system has various food-related programs, students often lose their support network when they graduate from high school. This problem can be exacerbated for teens who are leaving the foster care system and do not have help finding jobs and housing. One strategy is for K-12 educators and local colleges to coordinate transitions so that the county can better identify young people with needs and provide continuous services as they go through college or job training.

### 3. Increase Collaboration and Coordination with Health Care Providers

Sebastian County is home to many health care providers and programs. However, gaps in health care access persist.

- One stakeholder said the community has limited knowledge of the needs of seniors and residents with disabilities. Transportation issues prevent them from accessing healthy food.
- Some low-income residents discussed how a lack of access to dental care can create a vicious cycle of oral health and nutrition challenges that prevent them from finding and retaining jobs because having poor oral health was associated with substance abuse.
- Many residents identified a lack of access to mental health care as a barrier to maintaining employment.

Sebastian County could further integrate health care and food access. Because many people with food insecurity have health problems that can be managed or improved with a better diet, food pantries can play a role in supporting health interventions, and health care providers can facilitate access to healthy food distributions and benefit enrollment. Some food pantries in Sebastian County give clients food boxes designed to support effective diabetes management.

#### **4. Increase Public Transportation Infrastructure**

Transportation is a major barrier to accessing food, employment, and health services, and Sebastian County residents spend a significant share of their income on transportation. Residents were frustrated with the lack of public transportation and offered the following solution:

- Include residents and service providers in planning conversations to ensure a transportation service that is responsive to most people.
- Initiate or expand public transportation subsidies for low-income families,<sup>10</sup> including by offering free or low-cost shuttle services in underserved neighborhoods.

#### **5. Provide Support to Those Who Have Been Incarcerated**

Almost every adult resident we talked to had either been involved with the criminal justice system or had a family member who had. When a member is incarcerated, families can face financial and emotional stress, and when people are released, they have limited educational and job opportunities. One stakeholder said that programs for people returning from incarceration were limited. A resident noted that informal foster care, when a parent is incarcerated and another family members steps in to care for a child, can contribute to food insecurity.

- “Arkansas is one of two states that doesn’t pay inmates for work.<sup>11</sup> It impacts the overall family structure because inmates can’t pay for their basic needs in prison, that cost goes on the family, that contributes to poverty. It’s a whole structure that doesn’t support families living in poverty.” – Regional Stakeholder
- “It’s not just for the person in prison, it’s the entire family [that’s affected and becomes food insecure]. I have to take the kids because you’re locked up and I have to pay this and that. That’s the unaccounted-for foster care system that goes on, because now I have to take care of my niece and nephew.” – Adult Resident

In collaboration with city leaders, nonprofits, caseworkers, and employers, Sebastian County can develop holistic strategies to create job opportunities and training for those who have been incarcerated and to support those with a relative in prison. Sebastian County could incorporate trauma-informed strategies<sup>12</sup> to build capacity to address complex and intersecting needs of this population.

# WHY SEBASTIAN COUNTY, ARKANSAS?

## METHODOLOGY

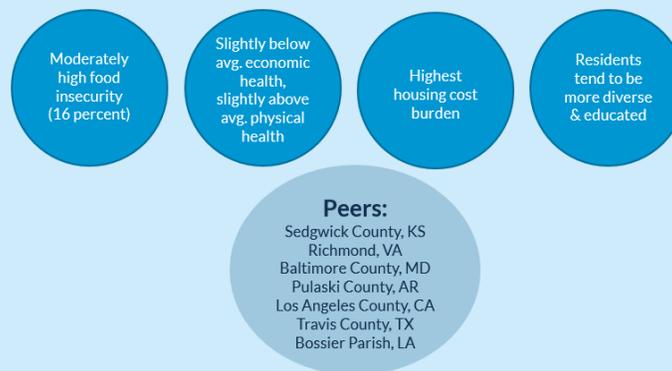
The Urban Institute implemented a two-phase study to help communities across the US use data to drive more effective approaches for addressing food insecurity.

**Phase I** of the project conducted a county-level secondary data analysis to create 10 typologies based on shared strengths and underlying economic vulnerabilities related to food insecurity. Sebastian County was categorized in peer group 4 with similar counties that had moderately high food insecurity and a high housing cost burden. Although Sebastian County has a lower cost of living than some other members of its peer group (e.g., Los Angeles County, California, and Travis County, Texas), it faced similar economic pressures, the greatest being housing cost compared with income.

**Phase II** involved speaking with residents and local key informants to investigate the lived experience and structural drivers of food insecurity in their respective counties. We tested the indicators assembled from the phase I analysis and identified other information about community issues to generate new insights on opportunities to address food insecurity by identifying promising next-generation strategies. This memo includes insights gained from phase II.

### Sebastian County compared to peer groups

Group 4: Moderately high food insecure urban counties with highest housing cost burden



The Urban Institute thanks Antioch for Youth & Family for helping identify key stakeholders working to address food insecurity in Sebastian County. Representatives from the following organizations participated in the community-based research:

- Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance
- Arkansas State House of Representatives
- City of Fort Smith Board of Directors
- Community Rescue Mission
- Crawford-Sebastian Community Development Council
- Fort Smith Community Health Council
- Fort Smith Housing Authority
- Fort Smith Public Schools
- Frontier Metropolitan Planning Organization and Transportation
- Mercy Hospital Outreach
- Next Step Homeless Services
- Restore Hope
- River Valley Regional Food Bank
- St. James M.B. Church
- Sebastian County DHS
- The STEPS Family Resource Center
- University of Arkansas, Fort Smith

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For more information about the food insecurity project, email [foodinsecurity@urban.org](mailto:foodinsecurity@urban.org).

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Feeding America 2017 “Map the Meal Gap” data: <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Feeding America 2017 “Map the Meal Gap” data: <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>.
- <sup>3</sup> American Community Survey 2013–17 five-year estimates.
- <sup>4</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition “Out of Reach” report, 2018: <https://reports.nlihc.org/oor/2018>.
- <sup>5</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2018* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 2019).
- <sup>6</sup> “Incarceration Trends,” Vera Institute of Justice, accessed September 13, 2019, <http://trends.vera.org/incarceration-rates?data=prison>.
- <sup>7</sup> Kids Count Data Center, “Children in Foster Care by Race in Arkansas,” Annie E. Casey Foundation, accessed September 13, 2019, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6380-children-in-foster-care-by-race?loc=5&loct=5#detailed/5/213-287/false/871,573,869,868,867,133,38,35,18,17/2701,2702,3,107/13250>.
- <sup>8</sup> See “Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit,” Race Forward, accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.raceforward.org/practice/tools/racial-equity-impact-assessment-toolkit>.
- <sup>9</sup> See “Applying a Racial Equity Lens to End Hunger,” Bread for the World, accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.bread.org/library/applying-racial-equity-lens-end-hunger>.
- <sup>10</sup> See Laura Bliss, “New York City Will Cut Transit Fares for Low-Income Riders,” City Lab, June 8, 2018, <https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/06/what-reduced-transit-fares-could-mean-for-low-income-new-yorkers/562412/>.
- <sup>11</sup> “State and federal prison wage policies and sourcing information,” Prison Policy Initiative, April 10, 2017, [https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/wage\\_policies.html](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/wage_policies.html).
- <sup>12</sup> See Elsa Falkenburger, Olivia Arena, and Jessica Wolin, “Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018).