

# Addressing Food Insecurity: Why A Comprehensive Farm Bill Is Essential for Rural Communities

Stephanie Oudghiri

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## *Policy Brief*

# **Addressing Food Insecurity: Why A Comprehensive Farm Bill Is Essential for Rural Communities**

**Stephanie Oudghiri**

As roughly 7.3 million students in rural school districts head back to school this fall, they remain largely unaware that the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (2018 Farm Bill) is due to expire on September 30, 2024 (Hartman et al., 2023). Enacted on December 20, 2018, and temporarily renewed in September 2023, this critical piece of legislation consistently has offered robust support to rural communities through various safety net measures, farm loans, conservation initiatives, and disaster assistance programs. The programs authorized by the Farm Bill address agricultural and food issues while also connecting rural communities with essential supports and services (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], n.d.). Many rural community members may be unaware that the Farm Bill includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is vital for providing nutrition assistance to low-income households. Support for the Farm Bill is vital, with nearly one in seven rural students living in poverty (Hartman et al., 2023). Rural matters, and understanding the Farm Bill's essential role in tackling food insecurity throughout rural America is crucial to addressing poverty.

The critical and timely role of the Farm Bill in addressing food insecurity in the US cannot be overstated. Bipartisan support is vital to the Farm Bill because it fosters cooperation across political lines, creating stable and lasting policies that ensure the survival of rural communities. At the close of 2019, 1 of every 10 U.S. households faced food insecurity, indicating a lack of "sufficient food for an active, healthy life for all household members" (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). According to Feeding America (n.d.), some of the most severe levels of food insecurity are found in rural communities, with 9 out of 10 counties having the highest rates of food insecurity located in these areas.

### **Rural Food Security**

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in its early stages, the rates of food insecurity across the United States doubled overall and tripled among households with children (Schanzenbach & Pitts 2020). Prior to

and amid the pandemic, levels of food insecurity were more elevated in rural (nonmetropolitan) regions and urban cores compared to suburban areas (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). The incidence of food insecurity is more pronounced in rural areas and city cores than in suburban areas. In 2020, 11.6% of nonmetropolitan (rural) households and 12.7% in city centers were identified as food-insecure, in contrast to 8.8% of suburban households (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2021). Across the US, rates of food insecurity vary from region to region, with many of the most food-insecure areas concentrated in the South (Feeding America, n.d.; Gundersen et al., 2017).

Some factors that impact food security in rural areas include declining populations and consolidation among large food retailers, which have led to a decrease in grocery stores, while dollar stores have increased (Smith et al., 2023). Rural residents face longer travel distances to reach supermarkets compared to urban counterparts and spend more time commuting for food shopping. Additionally, rural households participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are typically farther from food stores than non-SNAP households (Rhone et al., 2019). Rural residents' food access is likely influenced by access to land and natural resources, sharing or receiving produce from gardens, and engaging in hunting or fishing (Morton et al., 2008), but these traits do not seem to be sufficient to ensure that rural residents do not go hungry.

Researchers widely recognize food insecurity as a structural issue intertwined with various factors operating at multiple levels. These factors contribute to poverty and material hardship and hinder social mobility. Examples include a lack of affordable housing and an inadequate social safety net (Bowen et al., 2021). Importantly, these issues are closely linked with geographic location and rurality. Many rural areas face persistent challenges such as ongoing poverty, high unemployment, and economic disinvestment, and most counties with very high rates of food insecurity are characterized by concentrated and enduring poverty (Feeding America, n.d.).

## **Food Security Matters for Education**

Food security for rural students is a significant issue that has far-reaching implications for educators. Many students in rural areas face challenges related to accessing an adequate and consistent food supply (Kenney et al., 2021; Running Bear et al., 2021). This lack of food security can have a profound impact on their overall well-being and academic performance (Baugus, 2020). For educators, addressing food security among rural students is crucial because hunger and malnutrition can directly affect a student's ability to learn and succeed in school. Students who do not have access to nutritious food may experience difficulties concentrating in class, have low energy levels, and struggle with cognitive development (DeBate et al., 2021), leading to poor academic performance, absenteeism, and behavioral issues in the classroom. Educators play a vital role in identifying and supporting students struggling with food insecurity. By understanding the challenges that students face outside the classroom, educators can provide appropriate resources and support to help ensure that students have access to healthy meals. By addressing the issue of food security for rural students, educators can create a more conducive learning environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.

Food insecurity in rural areas can present unique challenges, but rural school districts play a critical role in mitigating these issues through various targeted programs and initiatives. School breakfast and lunch programs deliver free or reduced-price meals to eligible students, serving as key resources for rural schools to guarantee that students have access to nutritious meals each day. School breakfast programs ensure students receive a healthy morning meal, but families recognize the challenge of getting children to school early enough to participate, as breakfast is typically served before the school day begins (Feeding America, n.d.).

### **Policy, Food Security, and the Farm Bill**

State and federal policies are crucial in addressing food security issues for rural students by implementing key initiatives designed to improve access to nutritious meals. The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, administered by the USDA, provide healthy meals to students from low-income families, ensuring that those in rural areas also have access during the school day. Although school lunches are typically not

included in the Farm Bill, which covers a wide array of agricultural and food programs, the legislation can still affect school meals. This influence is especially notable in the area of nutrition through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest food assistance program that supports 20 million children and is vital for lifting millions out of poverty, strengthening local economies, and aiding vulnerable populations, has been funded through the Farm Bill for many years, with its nutrition title being the largest of the 12 titles included in the legislation (USDA, 2024).

According to Feeding America (n.d.), SNAP offers essential support to individuals with very low incomes, with two-thirds of its recipients being children, seniors, or individuals with disabilities. This program assists families in stretching their food budgets, alleviating hunger and allowing them to buy healthier food options. Crafted to react quickly to rising needs, SNAP increases during economic downturns and decreases as the economy improves, significantly enhancing employment opportunities and lowering the poverty rate for families in rural communities. As Congress discusses the Farm Bill, particularly the funding and framework for SNAP, there are concerns that SNAP benefits may be significantly reduced. The Congressional Budget Office, which calculates the budget from the Farm Bill, projects funding for SNAP to be reduced by nearly \$30 billion over the next decade (Bergh et al., 2024). Without a comprehensive Farm Bill, rural families will encounter serious challenges.

### **How You Can Help**

As the September 30, 2024, deadline nears, people in rural communities should take action to push for the renewal of the Farm Bill and stay informed about possible changes. Although the Farm Bill is already a year overdue, this situation is a chance for involvement and advocacy, highlighting the urgent need for swift action from the U.S. Senate. I encourage everyone to speak up about food insecurity in rural areas. Start by talking to your family and friends about the Farm Bill and sharing information on social media using the hashtag #FarmBill to connect with others online. You can also visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/take-action/advocate/farm-bill> for resources to help you reach out to Congress and support the passage of a strong Farm Bill.

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### Author:

**Stephanie Oudghiri** is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies and Director of the Center for Rural Research, Education, and Outreach at Purdue University. Contact: [stoudghi@purdue.edu](mailto:stoudghi@purdue.edu)

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