



Childhood Hunger in America's Suburbs

The Changing Geography of Poverty

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Executive Summary

The geography of childhood hunger in America is changing.

Among schools for which accurate trends can be tracked, 42 percent of American public school children were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch before the Great Recession.¹ By the school year ending in 2013, 51 percent of children were eligible. Of the students newly eligible for school lunch assistance, nearly half lived in the suburbs. Suburban public schools still have a lower percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches than schools in the rest of the country. **But the rise of child poverty in suburban areas** means that suburbs increasingly look like the rest of America when it comes to the prevalence of poor children.

Today, there are likely more American children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch in suburbs than in towns and rural areas combined. And while food insecurity in the aggregate is still greater in the cities than in the suburbs, between the school years 2006-07 and 2012-13, the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch grew at a much faster rate in the suburbs than in cities, rural areas or small- to mid-sized towns.

A review of data from the National Center for Educational Statistics finds:

- **Nationwide, the Great Recession made the risk of childhood hunger greater.** Among public schools for which accurate comparisons could be made, the number of public school children eligible for free or reduced-price

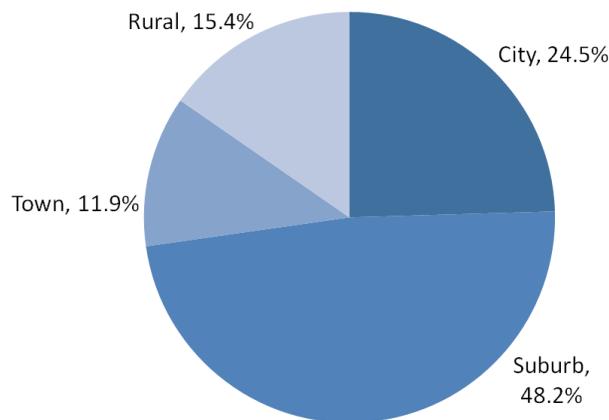
lunch increased by nearly 4 million. (This number includes 49 states plus Washington, D.C.; Nevada did not report complete data to the U.S. Department of Education.)

- **The geography of school lunch eligibility has changed since the Great Recession. A strong plurality of students newly eligible for the free or reduced-price school lunch program lives in the suburbs: 48 percent.** By comparison, 15 percent live in rural areas, 25 percent live in cities and 12 percent live in small- or mid-sized towns. (See Figure ES-1.)
- **Of public school children eligible for free or reduced lunch nationwide, nearly one-third now live in the suburbs.** Among students from public schools included in this study, nearly 6.5 million suburban children were eligible for free or reduced lunch in 2012-13, more than the number of children from rural communities and towns combined.

Compared to the findings in last year's Fair Share Education Fund analysis of childhood hunger in 2011-12, the trend toward increasing suburban poverty has continued, with a greater share of suburban children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in this analysis compared to last year's.

The suburbs now look more like the rest of America when it comes to poverty and children living in food-insecure households. The share of suburban students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch is catching up to the share of eligible students in other types of communities.

Figure ES-1. Share of Public School Students Newly Eligible for Free or Reduced-price Lunch by Locale, from 2006-07 to 2012-13



This analysis comes as other data shed additional light on how much worse American poverty and hunger have become.

- More than one in seven Americans is now poor, according to 2013 census data, compared with one in eight Americans in 2004.²
- Nearly 16 million children lived in food-insecure households in 2013, and the percentage of all children living in food-insecure households increased from 17 percent to 21 percent from 2007 to 2013.³
- Since the year 2000, poverty has grown twice as fast in America's suburbs as in its cities.⁴
- Between 2000 and 2008-2012, the number of poor Americans living in distressed suburban neighborhoods (communities where at least 40 percent of residents live under the poverty line) increased by nearly 60 percent, to more than 972,000.⁵

Childhood Hunger in America's Suburbs shows the changing geography of childhood hunger at a time of growing suburban poverty. This report demonstrates that the risk of childhood hunger is an issue affecting nearly every American community, including communities that might otherwise think that hunger is a problem that occurs "somewhere else."

Introduction

For a hungry child, life can be hard. Hunger is painful; it makes children depressed and anxious, and is a predictor of chronic illness. Hunger can also harm a child's ability to learn and be successful in school, putting his or her future at risk.⁶

Childhood hunger in the U.S. has increased in scale since 2008, when the Great Recession plunged millions of Americans into financial hardship and instability. In just the first year of the recession, the number of children living in food-insecure households jumped by more than a third, to more than 16 million.⁷ But as the risk of childhood hunger has grown, bringing with it the need for bold policy changes, the composition of childhood hunger has changed too, requiring new understanding and analysis.

For five decades, going all the way back to the beginning of the War on Poverty, America has

treated childhood hunger as a plight that affects primarily the inner cities and rural areas. While childhood hunger existed in the suburbs, it was not as prevalent, and was not a driving reason for our nation's policies fighting hunger.

The landscape has changed. Since the Great Recession, the suburbs have witnessed a disproportionate increase in the number of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. And today, the scourge of childhood hunger is growing more quickly in the suburbs than anywhere else, including urban and rural areas.

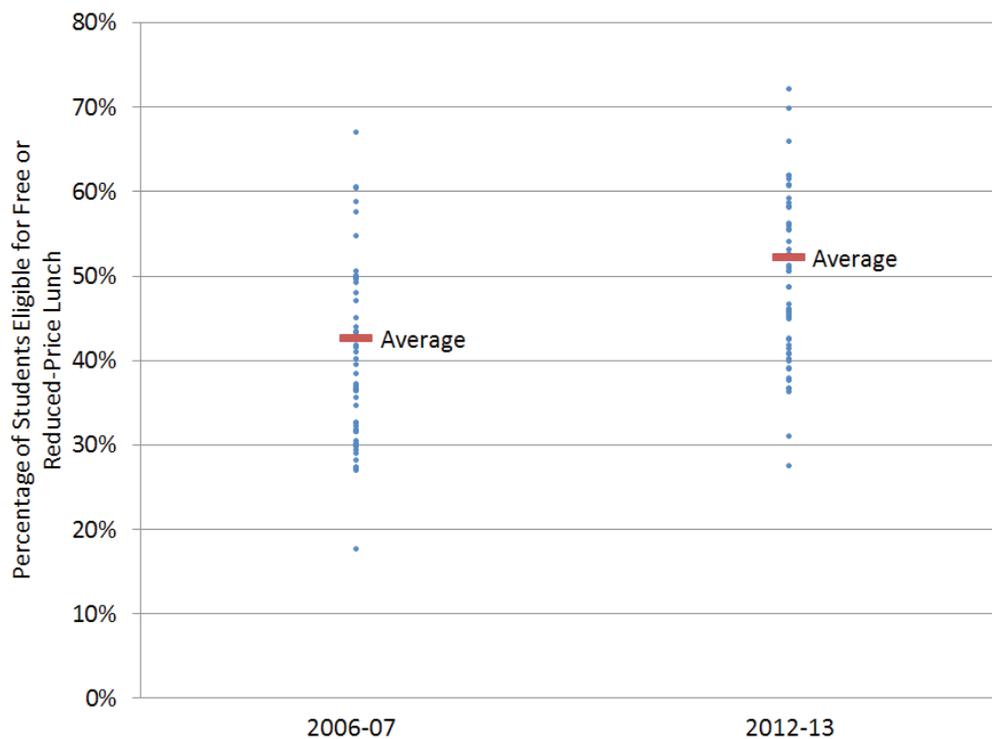
Letting American children go hungry puts those children at great personal peril, and also puts at risk our education system, our economy and our country's future. As America continues along the path of economic recovery, we must ensure that children at risk of hunger are not left behind.

School Lunch Program Eligibility Increased Nationwide

Between 2006-07 and 2012-13, the number of students eligible for free or-reduced-price school lunch grew by more than a fifth, in schools that reported data to the National Center for Educational Statistics for both years. (See “Understanding the Data in this Report,” below.) Because school-lunch eligibility depends on evidence that students’ families are low-income, this rise in

eligibility suggests a greater level of food insecurity in 2012-13 than in 2006-07. (In the 2015-16 school year, to qualify for a free lunch a child’s household must live at less than 130 percent of the federal poverty guideline – a household income of \$26,117 for a family of three; to qualify for reduced-price lunch, that same family must live at less than 185 percent of the poverty guideline, or \$37,167.)⁸

Figure 1. Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by State, by Year



Understanding the Data in this Report

In this report, we track trends in eligibility for free and reduced-price school lunches among public school students, using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Free and reduced-price lunch eligibility provides an important and direct window into food insecurity among children, but the data used to track eligibility are not perfect and come with important limitations:

- **Excluded data** – To develop an accurate understanding of how school lunch eligibility has changed in various types of communities, we excluded from this analysis schools that did not report data on eligibility in either of the school years analyzed, as well as those reporting shifts in the type of locale (city, suburb, etc.) in which they are located.
- **Eligibility as a measure** – Several states (most notably Utah) and several urban areas (most notably several in southern Texas) reported abnormally large increases in school lunch assistance eligibility between 2006-07 and 2012-13. It is unknown whether these jumps represented increases in the number of poor students, expanded efforts to enroll eligible students, or changes in reporting practices by schools.

Readers are advised that the comparisons included in this report are valid only for the public schools that have reported complete data to the NCES and that data may, in a limited number of cases, reflect administrative changes as opposed to actual changes in students' economic status.

Food insecurity increases with every economic downturn, and with the 2008 Great Recession, this was true in all types of communities—cities, rural communities, towns and the suburbs.

According to U.S. Department of Education data, eligibility for free and reduced-price lunches rose across the nation between 2006-07 and 2012-13. Before the recession, 42 percent of public school students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches; in 2012-13, 51 percent of students were eligible, an increase of 9 percentage points.

State-by-state data show the significance of the 2008 Great Recession in terms of increasing eligibility rates for participation in the National School Lunch Program. (See Figure 1.) The greatest increase in eligibility was in Utah, which saw the

share of all students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch climb by 32 percentage points, from 30 percent to 62 percent. Delaware saw total eligibility climb 16 percentage points, from 37 percent to 53 percent. Florida, Michigan, Texas and Rhode Island followed with the next-largest increases in total school lunch eligibility. (See Table 1.)

Washington, D.C., saw its students' eligibility for free and reduced-price school lunch decline by 3 percentage points, from 59 percent to 56 percent. In all other states eligibility increased at least somewhat, with the smallest increases coming in North Dakota and New York, which both saw eligibility increases of 2 percent. West Virginia, Arkansas, and Kentucky followed with the next-smallest increases in eligibility. (See Table 2.)

Table 1. Greatest Increases in Total Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by State, for Schools Reporting Data in Both Years*

State	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2006-07	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2012-13	Eligibility change (percentage points)
Utah	30%	62%	32
Delaware	37%	53%	16
Florida	45%	59%	14
Michigan	33%	47%	14
Texas	47%	61%	14
Rhode Island	32%	46%	14
Indiana	36%	49%	12
Oregon	42%	54%	12
North Carolina	43%	56%	12
Idaho	37%	49%	12

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Table 2. Smallest Increases in Total Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by State, for Schools Reporting Data in Both Years*

State	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2006-07	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2012-13	Eligibility change (percentage points)
District of Columbia	59%	56%	-3
North Dakota	29%	31%	2
New York	44%	46%	2
West Virginia	49%	52%	3
Arkansas	58%	61%	4
Kentucky	51%	55%	5
Mississippi	67%	72%	5
Louisiana	60%	66%	5
California	50%	56%	6
Montana	36%	43%	7
Oklahoma	55%	62%	7

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

School Lunch-Assistance Eligibility Increased Faster in the Suburbs than Elsewhere

Suburban public schools saw eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch rise faster than any other type of public school between 2006-07 and 2012-13, among schools with data valid for direct comparison.⁹ (See methodology.) And while a greater share of students in city schools are still eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than students in suburban, rural or town locations, suburban public schools saw eligibility increase by 11 percentage points, versus 8 percentage points for schools in cities, 10 percentage points for schools in towns, and 9 percentage points for rural schools. (See Table 3 and Figure 2.)

Nearly half of the public school students who became newly eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2012-13 versus 2006-07 lived in suburbs. One quarter lived in cities, and the remaining quarter lived in towns and rural areas. (See Figure 3.)

Table 3. Increases in Total Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by Locale*

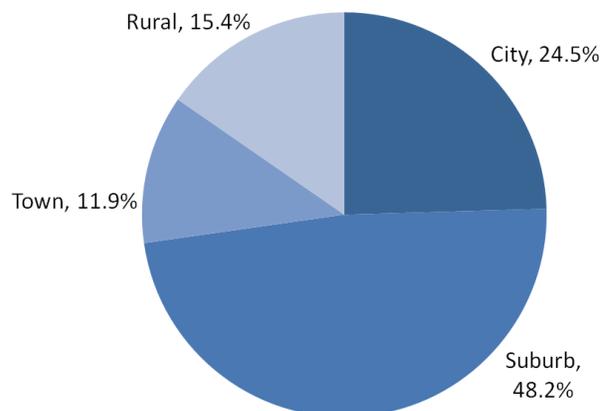
	Total eligibility 2006-07	Total eligibility 2012-13	Eligibility change (percentage points)
City	55%	63%	8
Suburb	32%	44%	11
Town	46%	56%	10
Rural	41%	50%	9

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Figure 2. Change in the Share of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, Between 2006-07 and 2012-13, by Locale



Figure 3. Share of Public School Students Newly Eligible for Free or Reduced-price Lunch by Locale, from 2006-07 to 2012-13



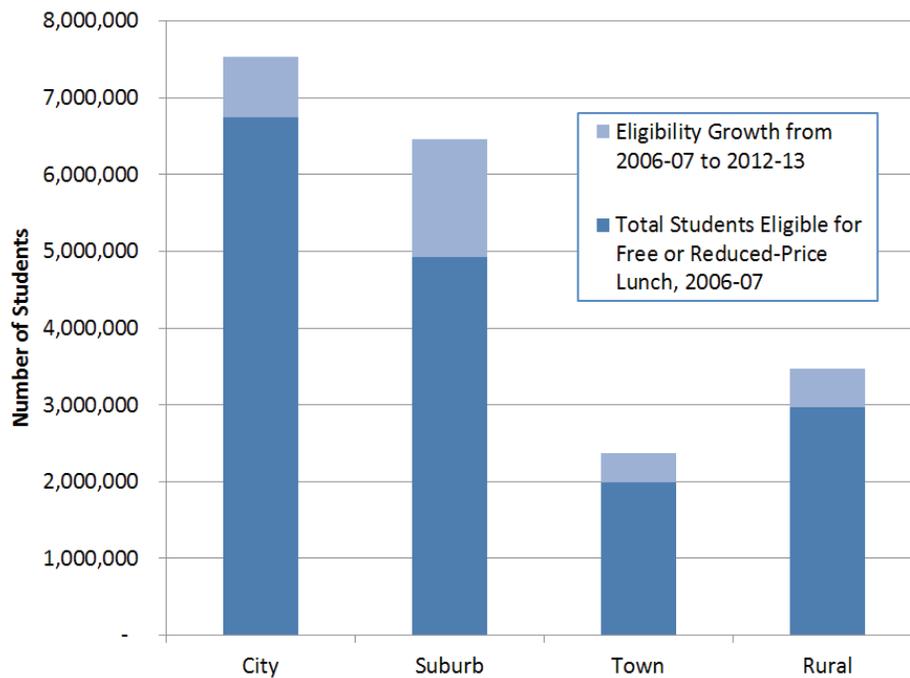
The increase in school lunch eligibility in suburban schools since the beginning of the Great Recession has led to those schools more closely re-

sembling city schools when it comes to the share of students eligible for meal assistance. (See Table 4 and Figure 4.)

Table 4. Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch, and Total Enrollment, by Locale Type, 2006-07 and 2012-13, for Schools Reporting Data in Both Years¹⁰

	Total Eligibility 2006-07	Total Enrollment 2006-07	Total Eligibility 2012-13	Total Enrollment 2012-13
City	6,749,076	12,235,174	7,532,321	11,978,854
Suburb	4,918,513	15,195,340	6,457,696	14,794,909
Town	1,996,169	4,322,785	2,375,603	4,222,020
Rural	2,973,879	7,302,830	3,464,462	6,991,280

Figure 4. Growth in Public School Student Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch by Locale, from 2006-07 to 2012-13



Case Study in Childhood Hunger: Phoenix

The Great Recession hit Phoenix hard. The city, particularly its suburbs, was hit by wave after wave of foreclosures, driven by bad mortgages, then unemployment, then by the lasting effects of a troubled economy.¹¹ Phoenix's median income dropped by nearly \$2,000 from 2010 to 2013,¹² and as of 2013, Phoenix had the third highest poverty rate among the nation's 25 biggest cities.¹³

According to Jerry Brown of St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance, Arizona's largest charitable group, the Great Recession changed the landscape of hunger around Phoenix. "Before 2008, we were primarily a rural and inner city food bank, because that's where hungry people were. But after the recession, the landscape changed – suddenly,

hunger was something that threatened your suburban neighbor, families whose homes were foreclosed on, or who were struggling to stay in their home."¹⁴ Within just two years of the recession, the amount of food served by St. Mary's doubled.

The challenges faced by Phoenix are borne out by the data on public school free and reduced-price lunches. Between the 2006-07 and 2012-13 school years, the number of eligible children in Phoenix for whom accurate trends can be tracked increased by 10 percentage points. The number of eligible children in the suburbs surrounding Phoenix increased even more, by 16 percentage points. Today, nearly half of suburban Phoenix children – 45 percent – are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Trends by Urban Area

To compare trends between urban areas, we tallied school lunch eligibility among schools within federally defined Core-Based Statistical Areas, or CBSAs. A CBSA consists of a significant population center such as a city along with nearby communities to which it is linked economically and socially.¹⁵

Nearly every CBSA (96 percent) for which data were available saw an increase in the share of public school students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunches between 2006-07 and 2012-13.¹⁶ Decreases in eligibility occurred in just 4 percent of CBSAs. The overall average increase in eligibility across all CBSAs was 10 percent.

Brownsville, Texas, experienced the greatest overall increase in the share of public school students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch

between 2006-07 and 2012-13 (among the top 100 CBSAs for total public school enrollment), with a 65 percentage point increase in eligibility. (See "Understanding the Data in this Report," above, for a caveat applying to data from southern Texas.) McAllen, Texas; Salt Lake City, Utah; Provo, Utah; and Cape Coral, Florida, followed with the next largest increases in eligibility. (See Table 5.)

Of the 100 biggest CBSAs (in terms of total public school enrollment 2012-13), Los Angeles was the only city that did not see eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch increase from 2006-07 to 2012-13 (its share of eligible students stayed the same). The cities with the next smallest increases in eligibility were New York, New York; San Jose, California; Visalia, California.; and Tucson, Arizona. (See Table 6.)

Table 5. Greatest Increases in Total Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by CBSA (among top 100 CBSAs for total public school enrollment 2012-13)*

CBSA	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2006-07	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2012-13	Eligibility change (percentage points)
Brownsville-Harlingen TX	23%	88%	65
McAllen-Edinburg-Pharr TX	22%	83%	61
Salt Lake City UT	30%	67%	37
Provo-Orem UT	24%	53%	29
Cape Coral-Fort Myers FL	42%	65%	23
San Antonio TX	40%	63%	23
Ogden-Clearfield UT	28%	49%	21
Greensboro-High Point NC	41%	59%	18
Stockton CA	49%	66%	17
Orlando FL	44%	61%	16

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Table 6. Smallest Increases in Total Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch by State (among top 100 CBSAs for total public school enrollment 2012-13)*

CBSA	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2006-07	Percentage of all enrolled students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 2012-13	Eligibility change (percentage points)
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana CA	56%	56%	0
New York-Newark-Edison NY-NJ-PA	42%	44%	2
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara CA	34%	37%	3
Visalia-Porterville CA	70%	73%	3
Tucson AZ	37%	42%	5
Corpus Christi TX	57%	63%	5
Louisville KY-IN	47%	53%	6
Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor OH	29%	35%	6
Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Tonawanda NY	36%	42%	6
Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers AR-MO	48%	54%	6

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Case Study in Childhood Hunger: Denver

In many ways, Denver has recovered from the recession.¹⁷ Foreclosures in Denver have returned to pre-recession rates, and by measures like unemployment rate, new businesses, and home price appreciation, Denver has recovered more quickly than most other big American cities.¹⁸

Yet the benefits of Denver's recovery have not made it to everyone. Among public school children for whom accurate trends can be tracked, the number of children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch jumped by 10 percentage points from the 2006-07 to 2012-13 school years. Among suburban children, eligibility jumped from 23 percent to 33 percent.

According to Janie Gianotsos of the Food Bank of the Rockies, which serves Denver along with Northern Colorado and all of Wyoming, the Great Recession forced the Food Bank to ramp up its operations in all types of Denver communities, including its suburbs.¹⁹ Since the recession, the Food Bank has almost tripled the amount of food it serves, including through its numerous child-specific programs.²⁰

Gianotsos says that today, many Colorado families are still forced to choose between basic necessities like food, heat, medicine and childcare (Colorado childcare ranks among the most expensive in the country).²¹ Even as the recovery takes hold, some children in Denver are being left behind.

Trends by Type of Urban Area

The difference between the rates of growth in school lunch eligibility in the suburbs versus the city during the Great Recession was the most dramatic in America's largest urban areas.

Large cities have historically had very high percentages of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (62 percent in 2006-07). However, large cities saw the percentage of eligible students rise by only 5 percentage points between 2006-07 and 2012-13, while their connected suburbs saw an increase of 11 percentage points.²² Meanwhile, eligibility in small and medium-size suburbs grew slightly more slowly than in small and mid-size cities. (See Figure 5.)

Suburban Eligibility Rate: Trends by State and Urban Area

Wyoming had the largest difference between suburban schools and the state as a whole in increases in eligibility rates for free or reduced-price lunches. Statewide, eligibility increased by 8 percentage points from 2006-07 to 2012-13, but in Wyoming's suburban schools the eligibility rate

increased by 19 percentage points. Next in terms of this difference were North Dakota, Mississippi, New York and Illinois. (See Table 7.)

In most of America's largest metropolitan areas, the percentage of suburban students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch grew substantially faster than in other parts of their metropolitan area.

Of the top 50 CBSAs (ranked by total student enrollment in 2012-13), 39 saw eligibility increase faster in the suburbs than in the rest of the region. The New York City CBSA, for example, experienced a 2 percent increase in eligibility region-wide, but New York City's connected suburbs saw eligibility increases of an average of 8 percent. (See Table 8.)

Among the 100 biggest CBSAs, McAllen, Texas, saw the greatest relative rise in school lunch eligibility in suburbs between 2006-07 and 2012-13, with the suburban eligibility rate increasing 9 percentage points faster than eligibility in McAllen's non-suburban locales. Cleveland, Toledo, New York, Los Angeles, and Phoenix also saw suburban child poverty as measured by school lunch eligibility increase much faster than poverty in the region as a whole. (See Table 9.)

Figure 5. Growth in Public School Student Eligibility for Free and Reduced-price Lunch in Cities vs. Suburbs by Size of CBSA from 2006-2007

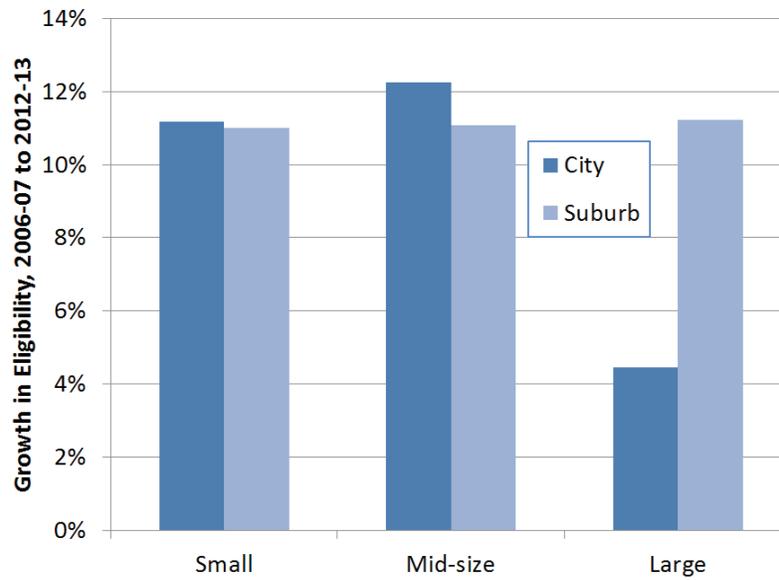


Table 7. Greatest Difference between Suburban and Overall Statewide Eligibility Growth, 2006-07 to 2012-13 by State*

State	Increase in suburban eligibility rate (percentage points)	Increase in statewide eligibility rate (percentage points)	Suburban vs. overall eligibility increase (difference in percentage points)
Wyoming	19	8	11
North Dakota	12	2	10
Mississippi	11	5	6
New York	8	2	5
Illinois	15	10	5
Arizona	14	10	4
South Carolina	12	8	4
Nebraska	13	9	4
Alaska	11	7	4
California	9	6	3

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Table 8. Eligibility for Free and Reduced-price Lunch in 50 Largest CBSAs by Total Enrollment, 2012-13*

CBSA	Total eligibility 2006-07	Suburban eligibility 2006-07	Total eligibility 2012-13	Suburban eligibility 2012-13	Overall eligibility change (pct. points)	Suburban eligibility change (pct. points)
New York-Newark-Edison NY-NJ-PA	42%	23%	44%	31%	2	8
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana CA	56%	49%	56%	55%	0	6
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet IL-IN-WI	41%	28%	51%	43%	10	15
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington TX	47%	36%	55%	47%	9	11
Houston-Baytown-Sugar Land TX	48%	45%	60%	55%	12	10
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta GA	44%	46%	56%	59%	12	13
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria DC-VA-MD-WV	28%	29%	36%	39%	9	11
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington PA-NJ-DE-MD	30%	19%	41%	30%	11	11
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario CA	52%	53%	66%	67%	14	14
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach FL	49%	49%	64%	65%	15	16
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale AZ	41%	30%	51%	45%	10	16
Boston-Cambridge-Quincy MA-NH	25%	22%	32%	29%	7	7
Detroit-Warren-Livonia MI	30%	24%	45%	39%	15	15
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont CA	35%	31%	42%	38%	7	8
Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington MN-WI	27%	23%	36%	34%	9	11
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue WA	30%	26%	40%	37%	10	11
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos CA	42%	39%	50%	51%	8	12
Denver-Aurora CO	32%	23%	42%	33%	10	10
San Antonio TX	40%	47%	63%	54%	23	6
St. Louis MO-IL	32%	31%	40%	40%	9	9
Baltimore-Towson MD	32%	26%	43%	38%	11	12
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater FL	45%	42%	57%	56%	12	14

*Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.

(continued on page 14)

Table 8 (continued from page 13). Eligibility for Free and Reduced-price Lunch in 50 Largest CBSAs by Total Enrollment, 2012-13*

CBSA	Total eligibility 2006-07	Suburban eligibility 2006-07	Total eligibility 2012-13	Suburban eligibility 2012-13	Overall eligibility change (pct. points)	Suburban eligibility change (pct. points)
Sacramento--Arden-Arcade--Roseville CA	37%	35%	49%	47%	12	12
Orlando FL	44%	42%	61%	59%	16	18
Kansas City MO-KS	30%	23%	39%	35%	9	12
Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton OR-WA	36%	32%	47%	45%	11	13
Austin-Round Rock TX	43%	22%	49%	30%	6	8
Cincinnati-Middletown OH-KY-IN	29%	25%	41%	37%	12	12
Pittsburgh PA	26%	23%	33%	31%	7	8
Indianapolis IN	35%	21%	46%	33%	11	12
Columbus OH	30%	22%	40%	33%	11	11
Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord NC-SC	39%	35%	53%	50%	14	15
Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor OH	29%	25%	35%	38%	6	13
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara CA	34%	24%	37%	26%	3	2
Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News VA-NC	35%	25%	43%	33%	7	8
Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro TN	39%	27%	49%	37%	10	11
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis WI	34%	12%	44%	21%	9	9
Salt Lake City UT	30%	24%	67%	65%	37	41
Memphis TN-MS-AR	59%	40%	67%	50%	8	9
McAllen-Edinburg-Pharr TX	22%	21%	83%	91%	61	70
Oklahoma City OK	50%	39%	58%	49%	8	10
Providence-New Bedford-Fall River RI-MA	31%	25%	44%	36%	13	11
Jacksonville FL	35%	25%	45%	34%	10	10
Raleigh-Cary NC	31%	26%	39%	33%	8	7
Richmond VA	35%	30%	44%	41%	9	11
Fresno CA	63%	34%	76%	48%	13	14
Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford CT	24%	20%	33%	29%	9	9
Louisville KY-IN	47%	39%	53%	47%	6	9
Honolulu HI	41%	39%	51%	47%	10	8
El Paso TX	64%	83%	76%	84%	12	0

Table 9. Greatest Increases in Suburban Eligibility for Free or Reduced-price Lunch as Compared with Non-Suburban Eligibility, 2006-07 to 2012-13 (among top 100 CBSAs for total public school enrollment 2012-13)*

CBSA	Increase in suburban eligibility rate (percentage points)	Increase in overall eligibility rate (percentage points)	Suburban vs. overall eligibility increase
McAllen-Edinburg-Pharr TX	70	61	9
Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor OH	13	6	7
Toledo OH	13	6	7
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana CA	6	0	6
New York-Newark-Edison NY-NJ-PA	8	2	6
Modesto CA	22	16	6
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale AZ	16	10	5
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet IL-IN-WI	15	10	5
Columbia SC	13	8	5
Salt Lake City UT	41	37	5

**Some numbers in table do not add up due to rounding.*

Conclusion

Although the American economy has gradually recovered from the Great Recession, there are far more children at risk of hunger today than there were before 2008. Yet while childhood hunger in America has changed, the way we think about childhood hunger hasn't. We still have a mental image of hungry schoolchildren in urban settings or in "poor" states like Mississippi or West Virginia. We don't think of childhood hunger in suburban America.

That has to change. Our perceptions have to change. And, with our perceptions, our policies.

America's suburbs are increasingly home to poor families struggling with food insecurity. From 2006-2007 to 2012-2013, the suburbs saw a disproportionate increase in the number of public school students eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

Childhood hunger is a solvable problem. We already have the tools we need to fight childhood hunger; we must make the most of all of them.

What are those tools? Here are four examples, with annual participation and cost figures:

The National School Lunch Program.²³ This program provides a nutritionally balanced lunch to children each school day, at free or reduced prices to children who qualify.

- Children participating: 30.4 million
- Lunches served: 5 billion
- Lunches served at free or reduced-price: 3.6 billion
- Total cost: \$12.6 billion

The School Breakfast Program.²⁴ This program provides a nutritionally balanced breakfast children each school day, at free or reduced prices for children who qualify.

- Children participating: 13.6 million
- Breakfasts served: 2.3 billion
- Breakfasts served at free or reduced-price: 1.9 billion
- Total cost: \$3.5 billion

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).²⁵ This program provides timely, targeted and temporary benefits to low-income Americans to buy groceries. It is the largest national anti-hunger program.

- People participating: 46.5 million
- Total cost: \$79.9 billion

The Summer Food Service Program.²⁶ This program provides free meals and snacks to low-income children during the summer months and long school vacations.

- Children participating: 2.6 million
- Meals served: 160 million
- Total cost: \$465 million

Hunger is a solvable problem, with a history of bipartisan support to address it. Former senators and majority leaders Tom Daschle, a Democrat, and Bob Dole, a Republican, penned a joint op-ed in 2013 for the *Los Angeles Times*. The bipartisan duo agreed, "In a country struggling to emerge from the worst economic recession since the Depression, this is no time to play politics with hunger."²⁷ Fair Share Education Fund could not agree more.

Methodology

This report measures the number of students reported by officials in their local school districts to be eligible under the National School Lunch Act for free or reduced-price lunches through the National School Lunch Program. School information was obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, via the National Center for Education Statistics' Elementary/Secondary Information System, 12 June 2015. Data were collected only for public schools.

Percentage eligibility was calculated based on schools' reported free and reduced-price lunch eligibility and reported total enrollment. In locale-specific analyses, the U.S. Department of Education's Urban-Centric Locale classifications were used.

Cautions and Caveats

This report covers those U.S. public schools that reported complete data on student enrollment and eligibility for school lunch assistance in both 2006-07 and 2012-13. Schools were excluded in whole from this analysis if they did not report total enrollment or total free and reduced-price lunch eligibility for either year under examination. For locale-specific comparisons, schools were excluded if they did not report their locale both in 2006-07 or 2012-13, or if their reported locale changed between those two reports; and for urban area size comparisons (Figure 5 for example), schools were also excluded if their urban area size changed between years.

This method of selecting data resulted in the exclusion of about a quarter of students in the locale and urban area size analyses. This also resulted in the exclusion not just of individual schools around the country, but also every public school in Nevada, because none of them reported the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2006-07. This also resulted in the exclusion of the city of Sumter, South Carolina, in which every school omitted at least one key data point.

The core based statistical area (CBSA) for each school was determined using NCES data. NCES data from 2012-13 did not specify public schools' CBSAs, so CBSAs from 2011-12 data were used instead. If the 2011-12 CBSA data field was blank, the CBSA specified by 2006-07 data was used if available.

Data could also be affected by certain changes in school populations. For example, if a state had a large shift between public and private school enrollment between 2006-07 and 2012-13, that could impact the findings.

Because schools did not report methodology on how they counted children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, data may have also been affected by changes in counting methods. In 2010, Congress strengthened a requirement that school districts directly certify children for free lunch if those children live in households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.²⁸ As the direct certification program saw wider rollout, it is possible that more schools also

based counts of free lunch eligibility using data from the program. One Department of Education white paper noted that this change probably led to greater accuracy in eligibility reporting, because schools that rely on direct certification for reporting are able to rely on data that have been approved by other programs.²⁹ While this change probably increased the number of children receiving free lunches, there is no reason to think that this change led to an artificially increased number of children reported as eligible for free lunch. And there is no reason to think that reporting methods using direct certification would disproportionately affect counts of children living in the suburbs versus other locales.

Notes

- 1 See “Understanding the Data in this Report” on page 5.
- 2 2013: Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, U.S. Census Bureau, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013*, September 2014; 2007: Carmen DeNavas-Walt et al., U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007*, August 2008.
- 3 Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, *Household Food Security in the United States in 2013*, available at ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err173.aspx, September 2014.
- 4 Fred Dews, Brookings Institute, *The Rapid Rise of Suburban Poverty*, available at brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/06/chart-rapid-rise-of-suburban-poverty, 11 June 2014.
- 5 Elizabeth Kneebone, Brookings Institute, *The Growth and Spread of Concentrated Poverty, 2000 to 2008–2012*, available at brookings.edu/research/interactives/2014/concentrated-poverty#/M10420, 31 July 2014.
- 6 Linda Weinreb et al., “Hunger: Its Impact on Children’s Health and Mental Health,” *Pediatrics*, 110(4), 2002.
- 7 See note 3.
- 8 USDA, *Federal Register / Vol. 80, No. 61 - Child Nutrition Programs—Income Eligibility Guidelines*, 31 March 2015.
- 9 Locales used in this report (city, town, suburb, rural area) are assigned by the National Center for Education Statistics, and are “based on an address’s proximity to an urbanized area (a densely settled core with densely settled surrounding areas).” A city is defined as a “territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city;” a suburb is “territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area;” a town is “territory inside an urban cluster;” and a rural area is located in census-defined rural territory. For additional information on locale definitions, see: National Center for Education Statistics, *Identification of Rural Locales*, accessed at nces.ed.gov/ccd/rural_locales.asp on 26 June 2015.
- 10 While total national public school enrollment increased from 2006–07 to 2012–13, among schools that reported data for both years enrollment declined. See Methodology for more details on the data used in this report.
- 11 Catherine Reagor et al., “Phoenix-Area Real Estate Collapse Echoed Troubles,” *The Arizona Republic*, 9 October 2011.
- 12 Mike Sunnucks, “Income Down, Poverty Up in Post-Recession Phoenix,” *Phoenix Business Journal*, 18 September 2014.
- 13 Ryan Van Velzer, “Phoenix Area 3rd Highest Poverty Rate Among 25 Largest Metros,” *The Arizona Republic*, 19 September 2014.
- 14 Jerry Brown, Director of Public Relations, St. Mary’s Food Bank Alliance, personal communication, 29 June 2015.

- 15 U.S. Census Bureau, *Geographic Terms and Concepts - Core Based Statistical Areas and Related Statistical Areas*, accessed at https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_cbsa.html on 11 June 2015.
- 16 Data for comparison years were not available for any city in Nevada, and for the city of Sumter, S.C.
- 17 Joey Bunch, "Study: Denver Weathered Recession Better than Most American Cities," *The Denver Post*, 11 November 2013.
- 18 Foreclosures: Howard Pankratz, "Foreclosure Filings in Colorado in 2012 Drop to Pre-Recession Levels," *The Denver Post*, 13 February 2013; other measures: Howard Pankratz, "Report: Colorado Cities Quick to Climb out of Recession, Denver No. 4," *The Denver Post*, 28 July 2014.
- 19 Janie Gianotsos, Director of Marketing and Community Relations, Food Bank of the Rockies, personal communication, 29 June 2015.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 In 2014, Colorado had the country's second least-affordable infant care, and sixth least-affordable care for a four-year-old: Child Care Aware of America, *Parents and the High Cost of Child Care 2014 Report*, 2014.
- 22 To compare trends across urban areas, we tallied school lunch eligibility among schools within Core-Based Statistical Areas, or CBSAs. A CBSA consists of a significant population center such as a city along with nearby communities to which it is linked economically and socially. The National Center for Education Statistics classifies CBSA cities (and the suburbs within those principal cities, but outside their urbanized areas) as small, mid-size, or large. A small city is less than 100,000 people; a large city is more than 250,000 people; a mid-size city is everything in between.
- 23 USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, *National School Lunch Program: Participation and Lunches Served*, available at web.archive.org/web/20150612181955/http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf, 5 June 2015.
- 24 U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *School Breakfast Program Participation and Meals Served*, available at web.archive.org/web/20150612194634/http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/sbsummar.pdf, 5 June 2015.
- 25 U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation and Costs*, web.archive.org/web/20150612200110/http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/SNAPsummary.pdf, 5 June 2015.
- 26 US. Dept. of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Summer Food Service Program*, archived at web.archive.org/web/20150612200432/http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/summer-food-service-program.aspx
- 27 Bob Dole and Tom Daschle, "Stop Playing Politics with Hunger," *Los Angeles Times*, available at articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/16/opinion/la-oe-dole-daschle-food-stamps-20130916, 16 September 2013.
- 28 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: State Implementation Progress, School Year 2012-2013 Report to Congress*, November 2013.
- 29 Lee Hoffman, Quality Information Partners, for U.S. Dept. of Education, *Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility Data in EDFacts: A White Paper on Current Status And Potential Changes*, September 2012.