

# Identifying and Serving Areas of Food Insecurity



**F**ood insecurity—resulting from reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet—affects about one in ten Americans. Among children, it is associated with anemia, cognitive problems, and poor oral health. Among adults, it is associated with diabetes and poor mental health. Among both children and adults, it is associated with poor nutrition and poor overall health.

Since 1981, the Westside Food Bank (WSFB) has sought to provide free, nutritious food to those in need in order to end hunger. It works primarily in the Westside area of Los Angeles County but also in adjacent areas of the San Fernando Valley, Central and South Los Angeles, and South Bay. This work requires identifying local areas of food insecurity, which is typically assessed at county or state levels.

Using publicly available data, RAND researchers sought to better understand the potential scope of food insecurity in Los Angeles County generally and in the WSFB service area particularly. Our tasks were to

1. conceptualize and measure food insecurity more broadly and in ways that are useful at local levels
2. identify the food-insecure population in Los Angeles County and in the WSFB service area
3. consider other aspects of this population's food needs, such as place and time of food distribution points.

## Key Findings



There is limited information on food insecurity in local areas, but such data as the Social Vulnerability Index can help those working in local areas best address needs.



Food banks may find partnership opportunities with other agencies and facilities, such as schools, libraries, and parks.



Further research could document the ability of agencies to expand, as well as best practices to adopt from other sources.

## Methods

We identified areas that are vulnerable to food insecurity in two ways. First, we identified areas that are high on the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)—which derives its value from U.S. Census tract data on socioeconomic, household, and demographic characteristics, as well as housing type and transportation data—using the most recently available American Community Survey data. Second, we identified schools where at least 40 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.



## Findings

Some attributes of vulnerability may be slightly more elevated in WSFB's service area compared with LA County overall. The data indicate that there is elevated vulnerability in the eastern and southern parts of the service area. The density of vulnerability just outside WSFB's service area suggests that vulnerability is elevated immediately to the east and south, and in some pockets to the north.

There may be partnership opportunities with other public facilities as well. Schools with a high proportion of students in free or reduced-price lunch programs are, not surprisingly, in areas of need. There are also a substantial number of city and county libraries in such areas. Many of these libraries may be able to partner with WSFB to distribute food to people living in vulnerable areas.

## Implications and Future Directions

This research suggests that WSFB should focus its resources on the most vulnerable areas within its existing service region and expand capacity to the east and south. Several tactics may help accomplish this strategy. First, WSFB could partner with schools in areas of greatest need. Receiving food at schools could be more convenient and less stigmatizing for parents and others than receiving it from a traditional food bank. Second, WSFB could partner with less traditional partners, such as libraries and public parks, that could provide distribution capacity on weekends. Third, WSFB could partner with health care or child care providers to reach people in need.

Future research could help in executing these tactics. Such research might first document the capacity of providers in the area and their ability to expand. Second, research could explore best practices and models of collaboration for different types of partners. Third, surveys and interviews with existing clients could help increase the understanding of cultural preferences in the service area. Finally, increased understanding of how food insecurity is addressed elsewhere may help improve practices in the United States.

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This brief describes work done in RAND Social and Economic Well-Being and documented in *Defining and Mapping Social Vulnerability as a Proxy for Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County*, by Alina I. Palimaru, Andrea S. Richardson, Leah Dion, and Wendy Hawkins, RR-A1983-3, 2023 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A1983-3](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A1983-3)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1983-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1983-1). RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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