

*A Brief on*

**“The Causes, Consequences, and  
Future of Senior Hunger in America”**

**&**

**“Senior Hunger in the United States:  
Differences across States and Rural  
and Urban Areas”**



**A Brief on**  
**“The Causes, Consequences, and Future of**  
**Senior Hunger in America”**

A groundbreaking study sponsored by the  
Meals On Wheels Association of America Foundation  
March 5, 2008

**What is this study?**

It is the most comprehensive national research study to look exclusively at senior hunger in the United States.

**Why is it considered groundbreaking?**

According to Dr. Eugene Smolensky, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley, and renowned economist who reviewed the study independently, it is a “first class report... a national study, using up to the minute methodology and the latest available data which finally takes us beyond anecdote, and small and partial studies, to a reliable picture of [senior] hunger nationwide.”

**Is there senior hunger in America?**

Absolutely. According to the report, hunger is a serious threat facing millions of seniors in the United States.

**Why was the report commissioned and who funded it?**

The Meals On Wheels Association of America Foundation (MOWAAF), with the financial underwriting of Harrah’s Foundation commissioned it precisely because, prior to this study, there was no reliable picture of senior hunger nationwide. MOWAAF is a 501 (c) (3) organization whose purpose is to raise public awareness about the problem of

# HUNGER

*is a serious threat facing millions  
of seniors in the United States.*

senior hunger in America and to solicit the financial support, primarily from corporations and individual donors, to eliminate senior hunger in America.

### Who conducted the study?

There were two Co-Principal Investigators, James P. Ziliak, Ph.D., Gatton Endowed Chair in Microeconomics and Director of the Center for Poverty Research, University of Kentucky and Craig Gundersen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Iowa State University. They were assisted by Margaret Haist, Ph.D., Senior Reseacher, University of Kentucky.

### How is “hunger” defined in the study?

In order to utilize existing national databases, the researchers looked at “food insecurity,” the term defined by the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture as “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” This food insecurity is measured across a continuum. In the study, Ziliak and Gundersen focus on three categories: the marginally food insecure; those at-risk of hunger (the food insecure); and those suffering from hunger (the very low food secure).

### Using the broader definition, how many seniors in America are facing the threat of hunger?

In excess of 5 million individuals -- an astonishing 11.4 percent of all seniors.

### Does the study identify who is hungry and who is at-risk?

Yes.

### Who is most likely to be at-risk?

The most likely to be at-risk are seniors with limited incomes, under age 70, African-Americans, Hispanics, the unmarried, renters and persons living in the South.

### Is hunger confined primarily to those who are poor?

No. The poor are more likely to be at-risk, but half of all at-risk seniors have incomes above the federal poverty line.

### Is hunger primarily a problem for minorities?

No, not at all. Over two-thirds of all hungry seniors are white.

Is the report contradictory in saying that certain minorities and the poor are at greatest risk, but there are more at-risk whites than any other race and as many at-risk seniors above the poverty line as below it?

No. There are a greater number of white seniors in the United States than there are minority seniors.

### Does the report find any correlation between marital status and the risk of being hungry?

Yes. Being divorced, separated, or never married is a risk factor. Married seniors are 20 percent less likely to be at risk of hunger.

### What about issues related to intergenerational family living arrangements?

One of the study's most astonishing findings is that living with a grandchild in the home is a risk factor for hunger. In fact, seniors living with a grandchild are 50 percent more likely to be at-risk of hunger than those who don't.

### How about age? Are older seniors more likely to be hungry?

That has been the conventional wisdom, but what the study finds is strikingly different. The research clearly indicates that that the senior cohort most likely at-risk of hunger is the younger old, those individuals in the 60-64 age range. An 84 year old is over one-third less likely to be at-risk of hunger than a 64 year old

### Is there a clear correlation between hunger risk and education?

Yes. Being a high school drop out increases the risk that a senior will suffer hunger. A high school graduate is 20 percent less likely to be at risk than a drop out. A college graduate is 40 percent less likely.

### What factors contribute to hunger or being at-risk of it?

Controlling for other factors the study enumerates the following causes:

- Being between the ages of 60 and 64
- Living with a grandchild
- Living at or below the poverty line
- Being a high school drop out
- Being an African-American or Hispanic
- Being divorced or separated
- Being a renter

### We have long had anecdotal evidence that African-Americans were more at risk of hunger than whites. Does this report tell us anything new relative to hunger and race?

Absolutely. First, the report gives us more than anecdote; it gives us concrete, quantitative evidence. Second, it reveals a surprisingly large gap relative to race. Holding other factors constant, African-Americans are 75 percent more likely to be at-risk of hunger than whites. Hispanics are 20 percent more likely than whites.

### Does hunger or risk of hunger affect health status?

Yes. These seniors are significantly more likely to be in poor or fair health. In addition, they are more likely to have lower intakes of major nutrients.

### Does hunger have an impact on the Activities of Daily Living (ADL) for seniors?

Yes, a staggering impact. A senior at risk of hunger has the same chance of an ADL limitation as someone 14 years older. That is, there is in effect a large disparity between actual chronological and “physical” age, so that a 64 year old senior suffering hunger is likely to have the ADL limitations of a 78 year old.

### What about senior hunger and the future? Does the study predict declining hunger rates?

Quite the contrary. The study projects significant increases by 2025 – 75 percent more seniors will experience some form of food insecurity and 33 percent more will suffer hunger.

## A Brief on

# **“Senior Hunger in the United States: Differences across States and Rural and Urban Areas”**

A study sponsored by the Meals On Wheels Association of America  
November 2009

### What is this study?

This is a follow-up to the groundbreaking 2008 report entitled “The Causes, Consequences and Future of Senior Hunger in America” that updates the findings on the extent and distribution of senior hunger across the nation using data from 2001-2007.

### Who conducted the study?

The same Co-Principal Investigators who conducted the 2008 study: James P. Ziliak, Ph.D., Gatton Endowed Chair in Microeconomics and Director of the Center for Poverty Research, University of Kentucky and Craig Gundersen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois.

### Is there anything new about this study?

Yes. The report documents the geographic distribution of senior hunger across states and by rural/urban status.

### Are rates of senior hunger in America improving?

No. In fact, there is a discernable upward trend in the number of seniors facing the risk of hunger. About 700,000 more seniors faced that risk in 2007 than did in 2001.



### Is this increase in seniors facing the risk of hunger due to economic factors?

No, not entirely. Poverty is a factor, but many other factors also contribute to risk. Only 38 percent of seniors at risk of hunger have incomes below the federal poverty line.

### Is senior hunger evenly distributed across the states?

Absolutely not. There is a wide variation of risk of senior hunger across the states, ranging from 1.5 percent to 12.3 percent.

### Is the risk of senior hunger a regional issue?

No, but seniors residing in the South are at greatest risk.

### What ten states have the highest rates of hunger risk among seniors?

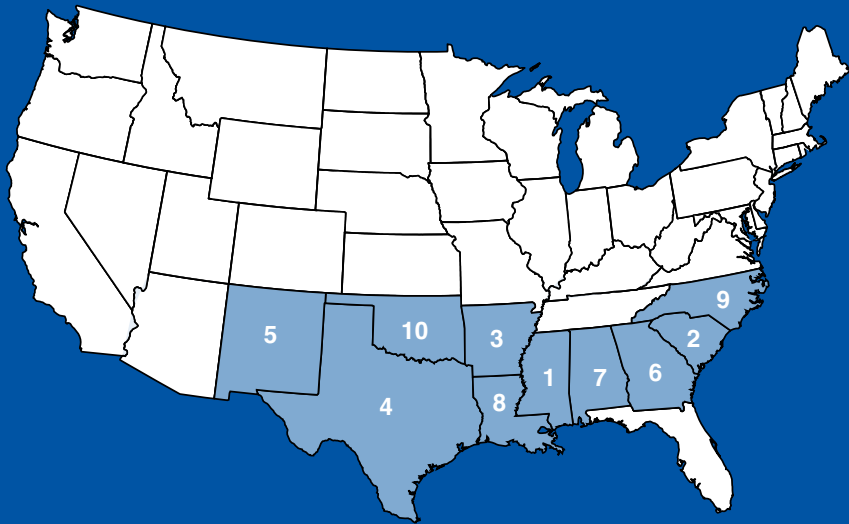
The top ten states in descending order (highest risk to lowest) are:

- Mississippi
- South Carolina
- Arkansas
- Texas
- New Mexico
- Georgia
- Alabama
- Louisiana
- North Carolina
- Oklahoma

### Do these top ten states have significantly higher rates of senior hunger risk than the other 40 states?

Yes. The states in the top ten of senior hunger risk all have rates of food insecurity in excess of 7 percent, which is at least 25 percent higher than the national average and double the rate of the states in the bottom ten.

# STATES WITH THE HIGHEST RATES OF HUNGER RISK AMONG SENIORS



## What, other than region, do these ten highest hunger risk states have in common?

These states tend to either have:

- higher concentrations of African Americans or Hispanics
- higher concentrations of seniors living in poverty or near poverty
- higher concentrations of seniors under age 70
- higher concentrations of disabled or unemployed seniors
- higher concentrations of seniors with 12 or fewer years of schooling
- higher concentrations of seniors living with grandchildren (with and without the adult parent present)

## Are other categories of seniors in these states also at risk of hunger?

Yes. High rates of hunger risk are prevalent across numerous demographic groups in those high food insecure states. The large number of categories of seniors with high rates of hunger risk makes targeting of assistance to those most in need especially challenging.

Are seniors living in other states relatively free from hunger risk?

By no means. Our comparative study shows that the aggregate increase in hunger risk from 2001 to 2007 was fairly widespread. Is the increase in seniors facing hunger risk significant? Of the five states with statistically significant increases, the average increase in hunger risk is 76 percent.

Is there a general difference in hunger risk in metropolitan (urban) and non-metropolitan (rural) areas?

In a typical year, the rate of risk in non-metropolitan areas has exceeded that of metropolitan areas, often by at least a percentage point.

Is the rise in risk of senior hunger a predominantly rural problem?

No. The rate of risk is higher in non-metropolitan areas, but because the majority of seniors live in metro areas, the recent rise in overall food insecurity is primarily due to an increase in metro areas.

*nearly*

**700,000**

*more seniors faced the risk of  
hunger in 2007 than did in 2001.*

Visit the MOWAA Website at  
[www.mowaa.org](http://www.mowaa.org)  
to access the full text of the following reports:

Senior Hunger in the United States: Differences  
across States and Rural and Urban Areas

Senior Hunger in the United States: Differences across States  
and Rural and Urban Areas/Supplementary Appendix

The Causes, Consequences, and Future of  
Senior Hunger in America





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