

FOOD SECURITY IN MAINE, CUMBERLAND COUNTY & PORTLAND

We all want Maine people to have access to the opportunities that allow them to be healthy. What you might not know is that today, many Maine families are having a difficult time putting food on their tables. People are not deprived of food because food is unavailable in the market, but rather because their ability to get that food is restricted, most often by limited income.

The U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.” Current research ranks Maine third in the nation for people experiencing very low food security (VLFS). This condition is when eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food. Previously called “hunger,” the USDA began referring to this condition as VLFS in 2006, though the methods used to assess it remained the same.

Maine	1996–1998	2003–2005	2010–2012	2013–2015
Food Insecure	9.8%	12.3%	14.9%	15.8%
Very Low Food Security (Hunger)	4%	4.6%	7.1%	7.4%

Cumberland County has 14.2% food insecurity prevalence. The food stamp program is now known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). In August 2016, Cumberland County lists 29,077 people using SNAP benefits including 10,769 children. Over one-third of all students live in families whose income qualify them for free and reduced price school meals. In Portland, during the 2014–2015 school year, over 50% of the students were eligible for free meals. This means that every other Portland Public School student lived in a household with an annual income, e.g., in a family of four, of \$31,000 or less. That was a total of 3,504 kids. Recent data for Portland (August 2015), lists 3,822 children under 18 in households using SNAP.

Portland School Meal Eligibility	2004–2005	2009–2010	2014–2015
Free (below 130% of poverty)	2,728 (37.7%)	3,026 (45.3%)	3,504 (50.7%)
Total (below 185% of poverty)	3,016 (41.7%)	3,261 (48.8%)	3,831 (55.5%)

It’s Not Just About Food

With food insecurity a daily reality for thousands of children in Portland, we must increase our sense of urgency about how to address the problem. Raw poverty is obvious when we encounter it, but there is a range of experience as we move from food security to those extreme conditions. Understanding that continuum lets us identify and target effective strategies, and make the best investments to increase food security for all members of our community. **Understanding the problem makes you part of the solution.**

How can we all work together to build strength in our community?