

## 2022 Community Profile: Food Security In Maine, Cumberland County, & Portland

All people living in Maine deserve to have access to the opportunities that allow them to be healthy. Today, many Maine families are having a difficult time putting food on their tables. People are not deprived of food because it is unavailable in the market, but rather because their ability to get that food is restricted, most often by limited income. The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed this discrepancy as well as exacerbated the financial burden on many low-income Mainers.

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 from the [Household Food Security Report](#) ranks Maine fifth in the nation for people experiencing very low food security (VLFS). Previously called “hunger” by the USDA, very low food security is defined as “when the eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.” Our rate is exceeded only by four states: Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia. In addition to ranking fifth for overall VLFS, Maine had the 10th highest child food insecurity rate in the country in 2019. That accounts for 44,520 Maine children who experienced hunger ([Feeding America](#)).

### Food Insecurity Rate in Maine

	1996-1998	2001-2003	2006-2008	2011-2013	2016-2018	2018-2020
<b>% Experiencing Food Insecurity</b>	8.7%	9.2%	13.7%	15.1%	13.6%	11.4%
<b>% Experiencing Very Low Food Security</b>	3.7%	2.9%	6.4%	7.1%	5.9%	5.5%

[USDA Household Food Security Report](#)

Currently, 11% of people residing in Cumberland County are food insecure. As demonstrated in the table below, the COVID-19 pandemic has directly impacted the ability of Mainers to afford and have access to food. Beginning with lockdown in March of 2020, the enrollment of various food supplement programs, one being the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) increased by 15,000 people from February to May of 2020 in Maine. For Maine there was a 12% increase within a matter of four months. As of August 2021, the number in Cumberland County has dropped back down to 23,500 participants who are receiving SNAP benefits, after increasing to over 26,000.

### Food Supplemental Program Increase in Maine at Start of the Pandemic

	February 2020	March 2020	April 2020	May 2020	Most Recent: Oct 2021
<b>Statewide Enrollment</b>	165,097	165,688 (+.35%)	176,094 (+6.28%)	180,164 (+2.31%)	162,959 (-9.54%)
<b>Cumberland County Enrollment</b>	23,191	23,559 (+1.56%)	25,276 (+7.28%)	26,059 (+3.09%)	23,217 (-10.9%)

[DHHS Programs & Benefits](#)

This data proves how essential food supplement programs are especially in a global crisis, but could there be another solution to a more sustainable and resilient food system? Perhaps a system in which we came together as a community to ensure consistent access to local and affordable food? A system where having access to food wasn't a choice, but a right? We have made strides in the right direction for example, by passing LD 1159: Resolve to End Hunger in Maine by 2030 as well as being the first in the nation to institute the Constitutional Amendment: Right to Food. However, there is still much work to be done.

In Portland, during the 2020-2021 school year, over 50% of the students were eligible for free or reduced meals. Recent data for Cumberland County (August 2021), lists 7,581 children under 18 in households using food supplemental programs.

### Portland School Meal Eligibility

	2009-2010	2014-2015	2018-2019	2020-2021
<b>Free (below 130% of poverty)</b>	3,026 (45.3%)	3,560 (50.7%)	3,530 (52%)	3,371 (49.52%)
<b>Total (below 185% of poverty)</b>	3,261 (48.8%)	3,811 (55.5%)	3777 (55.7%)	3635 (53.40%)

[Maine NEO School Lunch Report](#)

Participants enrolled in food supplemental programs have decreased since the beginning of the pandemic, and the overall rate of food insecurity has decreased from 2015-2017 as shown in the chart above. This sounds like good news, however, it does not mean that food insecurity is no longer a concern in the state of Maine. In fact, it is still quite critical. Maine is the most food-insecure New England state and among the five states with the highest prevalence of very low food security in the U.S.

With food insecurity a daily reality for thousands of families and children in Portland, we must increase our sense of urgency about how to address the problem. There is not just one way that food insecurity manifests, but rather a range of experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a lot about where there are gaps within the food system. Understanding the continuum of experiences 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?



2022 COMMUNITY PROFILE:

# FOOD SECURITY



In Maine, Cumberland County, and Portland



According to 2018-2020 averages

## 11.4%

of Maine households are food insecure

Maine ranks **5th** in the nation for very low food security, and **10th** for food insecurity among children.

CUMBERLAND COUNTY



PORTLAND

During the beginning of the pandemic, food supplemental programs like SNAP increased by

## 8%

in Cumberland County

**1 in 2** students in Portland Public Schools qualify for free meals



Passing LD 1159: Resolve to End Hunger in Maine by 2030, as well as Maine's new Constitutional Amendment: Right to Food are significant strides, but there is still much work to be done.

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