

Next meal elusive for hundreds of thousands of needy in D.C. area

By [Annie Gowen](#), Thursday, March 24, 8:04 PM

More than 400,000 Washington area residents experienced periods of hunger and empty cupboards during the recession, including tens of thousands living in some of the country's most affluent counties, according to a new study released Thursday.

The study, "Map the Meal Gap," used Agriculture Department, 2010 Census and unemployment data for a sweeping county-by-county portrait of hunger in America, from unemployed timber workers in the South to more than 1.7 million residents in Los Angeles with high unemployment and housing costs.

"Most people would be shocked to realize the extent of hunger in their own communities," said Vicki Escarra, president and chief executive of [Feeding America](#), the country's largest hunger-relief organization and the study sponsor. "People tend to think that hunger is 'over there' somewhere, but not here, not in my own back yard. But this report shows that simply isn't true — hunger is everywhere in our nation right now."

Nationally, the study showed that 16.6 percent of Americans experienced "food insecurity" — the feeling of not knowing where one's next meal is coming from — during 2009. About a third of them made too much money to qualify for food stamps or other assistance.

Regionally, the percentage was lower overall — about 10 percent — except in the District, where 15.8 percent — or 93,000 residents — experienced food insecurity. Affluent Fairfax and Montgomery counties each had about 70,000 residents experiencing hunger at a rate of 7 to 8 percent.

Representatives of local food banks expressed little surprise at the survey's results, saying it merely reinforces what they have been seeing at the ground level for [months](#): long lines of the jobless and needy struggling just as food and gasoline prices skyrocket. Their ranks are continuing to grow even as the economy improves, they say.

Lynn J. Brantley, president and chief executive of the Capital Area Food Bank, headquartered in Northeast, said that half the people who come for help are working two and three jobs and still can't pay the bills. The agency distributed a record 30 million pounds of food in 2010, up from 27 million in 2009.

“The face of hunger in American is changing,” Brantley said. “They’re coming in because they can’t make ends meet, and they’re embarrassed to go for food stamps.”

Locally, the percentage of those who are hungry but don’t qualify for federal assistance was far above the 30 percent national average — as high as 70 percent in affluent Loudoun County and 73 percent in the city of Falls Church.

Jack Cochran, a 61-year-old information technology administrator from Nokesville who was laid off in January, doesn’t qualify for food stamps and has been forced to go to the local food pantry in Manassas for groceries for himself and his disabled son as he sees his small severance dwindle.

“I’ve got another two months, and I’m in deep trouble if I don’t find work,” he said. A generous friend has given him packages of frozen steak and chicken to last for a while, but they’ll be eating beans and hot dogs when that runs out, he says.

The [Feeding America study](#) — underwritten by philanthropist Howard Buffett, son of Warren (who sits on the board of The Washington Post Co.) — showed that there is a \$21.3 billion shortfall in the food budgets of the nearly 50 million people who live at risk of hunger in the United States.

Rates of food insecurity ranged from a low of 5 percent in Steele County, N.D., to a high of 38 percent in Wilcox County, Ala., a rural community near Selma where the timber industry was hit hard when the construction market tanked.

A third of the counties that had both high food insecurity rates and high food costs were majority African American, the study said. Although Prince George’s County was not among that cohort, 13 percent of its population, or almost 111,000 residents, struggles with hunger, the study showed.

Cynthia Terry, president of Shabach Ministries in Landover, said that the need has grown so much in recent years that the food pantry is seeking a roomier warehouse. It gave away groceries to 10,000 last year, up from 2,100 five years ago.

Researchers also partnered with the Nielsen Co. to survey UPC bar codes on groceries to estimate the cost of a meal — \$2.54 per person nationally. Regionally, that number was higher — \$2.98 — and topped \$3 in many jurisdictions, including the District at \$3.41.

Residents say that the already high cost of food has gotten exponentially worse in recent months as prices on dairy, meat and fresh vegetables rise.

Stephanie Galloway, 48, a Northwest resident who works as a front desk clerk at a condominium building, said she was shocked when she went to the grocery store last week to buy food for herself and her 13-year-old granddaughter. Three bags of groceries that once would have cost about \$90 came to \$142.

“It’s almost impossible to believe,” she said. “Food prices have soared.”

She hasn’t been truly hungry. Yet. “I’ve learned to do without when I don’t have,” she said. “It’s never been a day when we’ve actually had ‘missed meal’ cramps.”

Anita Emerson, 46, a single mother of two from Gaithersburg, said she stretches her food stamps with handouts from a pantry and now avoids costly milk and cereal in favor of eggs and toast for breakfast.

“It’s just bad,” she said. “There have been times where I have not eaten so my children have more to eat. I’m an adult, I can do that. I can drink water or eat a piece of bread. But you don’t want your children to come and say, ‘Mom, I’m hungry,’ an hour after they’ve eaten.”

gowena@washpost.com