

The State of U.S. Military Food Insecurity

The Feeding America network of 200 food banks and their partner agencies serves active-duty military families across the U.S.—increasingly at food pantries located near military bases.



Military families make many sacrifices so their loved ones may bravely serve our country, but going without food should never be one of them. It is in our national interest to ensure that members of our all-volunteer force can perform their duties without the worry of whether their families have enough to eat.

In 1946, Congress created the National School Lunch Program to safeguard the well-being of our nation's children. As a matter of national security, lawmakers must also advance policies to ensure the well-being and morale of members of the armed forces and their families.

In 2020, nearly a quarter (24%) of active-duty service members were food insecure.¹

Active-duty service members are more likely to experience food insecurity if they have a lower rank or age, or if they have children.² Race and ethnicity are also factors. In 2020, active-duty families of color reported experiencing food insecurity twice as often as white, non-Hispanic families.³

Nearly half of the students at Department of Defense schools in the U.S. were eligible for free or reduced-price meals during the 2015-16 school year.⁵

Despite a relatively high level of need for food assistance among service members, many cannot access our nation's first line of defense against hunger: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In 2019, less than 0.5% of service members stationed in the U.S. were enrolled in SNAP at any point.⁴

Food insecurity has negative health impacts, contributing to weight gain, stress and chronic disease.

Ensuring adequate access to nutritious food is imperative to ensuring the long-term health of service members and improving military readiness.⁶

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO MILITARY HUNGER

PAY & EMPLOYMENT

Low salaries for enlisted members, high rates of unemployment for military spouses due to frequent moves, the high cost of living near many military bases, and high child care costs can all strain a military family's budget.⁷

MILITARY CULTURE

Stigma, negative perceptions, embarrassment and fear of professional repercussions may deter service members from seeking assistance for which they are eligible.⁸

SNAP INELIGIBILITY

Service members who live off base receive a Basic Allowance for Housing to help cover costs. This allowance counts as income in the calculation to determine SNAP eligibility, disqualifying many service members from accessing SNAP benefits. Service members who live on base do not face this problem.⁹

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Ending military hunger is a matter of national security.

Feeding America is calling on Congress to address military hunger in the final fiscal year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) by including the following provisions that expand eligibility for the Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) for military families:

- **The House-passed provision that excludes the Basic Allowance for Housing from the gross income calculation for BNA eligibility.**
- **The Senate provision that extends BNA eligibility to households making less than 150% of the federal poverty level (an increase from the current 130% threshold).**

Feeding America also supports bipartisan legislation from Sens. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., and Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, that will help more service members access SNAP benefits by excluding the Basic Allowance for Housing from the gross income calculation for SNAP eligibility.

QUESTIONS?

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¹ Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel & Readiness, U.S. Department of Defense. "Strengthening Food Security in the Force: Strategy and Roadmap." July 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jul/14/2003035423/-1/-1/1/STRENGTHENING-FOOD-SECURITY-IN-THE-FORCE-STRATEGY-AND-ROADMAP.PDF>.

² Lutz, Jamie, and Caitlin Welsh. "Solving Food Insecurity among U.S. Veterans and Military Families." Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 1, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/solving-food-insecurity-among-us-veterans-and-military-families>.

³ "The Diverse Experiences of Military & Veteran Families of Color," Blue Star Families, February 2, 2022, <https://bluestarfam.org/racialequity-initiative/research-and-advocacy/>.

⁴ Department of Defense (DOD), Report of the Thirteenth Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation: Volume IV. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Washington, DC: DOD, December 2020), https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/QRMC-VoL_4_final_web.pdf.

⁵ Government Accountability Office. "MILITARY PERSONNEL DOD Needs More Complete Data on Active-Duty Servicemembers' Use of Food Assistance Programs." July 2016. www.gao.gov/assets/680/678474.pdf.

⁶ Center for Disease Control. "Chronic Diseases and Military Readiness." CDC, July 21, 2020. www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/publications/factsheets/military-readiness.htm.

⁷ Lutz, Jamie, and Caitlin Welsh. "Solving Food Insecurity among U.S. Veterans and Military Families." Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 1, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/solving-food-insecurity-among-us-veterans-and-military-families>.

⁸ Lutz, Jamie, and Caitlin Welsh. "Solving Food Insecurity among U.S. Veterans and Military Families." Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 1, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/solving-food-insecurity-among-us-veterans-and-military-families>.

⁹ Veteran.com "SNAP Benefits." Accessed on October 26, 2022. www.militarybenefits.info/snap-benefits/.



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Feeding America is the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States. Through a network of more than 200 food banks, 21 statewide food bank associations, and over 60,000 partner agencies, food pantries and meal programs, we helped provide 5.2 billion meals to tens of millions of people in need last year.

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