



New Data Reveals Disturbingly High Rate of Food Insecurity for Many Maryland Students

January 2024

*According to new data from the Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey/Youth Tobacco Survey (YRBS/YTS), many secondary school students in Maryland experience the limited or uncertain access to adequate food — a condition known as **food insecurity**. The stress of food insecurity has negative impacts on student health and well-being. For instance, more than half of food insecure middle school students in Baltimore County have seriously considered suicide. Even when our schools have the best teachers, curriculum, and resources, when a student's basic needs aren't met, they are not ready to learn. This report summarizes the impact of food insecurity, as well as the proven solutions.*

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About the Maryland Student Health Survey

The **Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey/Youth Tobacco Survey (YRBS/YTS)** is an assessment of the health and well-being of middle and high school students. The survey is administered every other year by the Maryland Department of Health and the Maryland State Department of Education and it measures risk factors, including:

- Safety behaviors;
- Depression and mental health;
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs;
- Nutrition and physical activity; and
- Sexual behavior.

In 2021-2022, more than 58,000 Maryland secondary school students participated in the survey.

Most likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021-2022 YRBS/YTS survey revealed the following data trends, as compared to the previous survey from the 2018-2019 school year.

- More students report experiencing poor mental health, including feeling sad or hopeless;
- More students report experiencing suicidal ideation and having attempted suicide; and
- Fewer students report substance use, including a decrease in the use of tobacco, marijuana, alcohol, and other drugs.



For more information about the Maryland YRBS/YTS, see:

<https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/ccdpc/Reports/Pages/YRBS-Main.aspx>

About the Baltimore County Student Support Network

The Student Support Network provides food, basic necessities, and advocacy to support the well-being of Baltimore County Public School students in need. In our Rooms of Support, we meet students where they are with food, school supplies, clothing, and personal care products — all free to students who need them. Our work also includes advocacy to create systemic change through policy, budgets, and raising awareness. Learn more at www.StudentSupportNetwork.org.

For additional information about this report, please contact Tam Lynne Kelley, Chair of the Student Support Network's Advocacy Committee (advocacy@studentsupportnetwork.org).

Measuring Food Insecurity

Food insecurity exists when a young person has limited or uncertain access to the food they need to live an active and healthy life. In the 2018-2019 school year, Maryland was the first state to measure **food insecurity** on the YRBS/YTS. Unlike previous studies where food insecurity was reported by parents, the YRBS/YTS asked students themselves these two questions to determine if they experience food insecurity:



- ***Was their family worried that the food money would run out before they could buy more?***
- ***Did the food their family bought not last and they did not have money to get more?***

Maryland YRBS/YTS Data Summary

The 2021-2022 Maryland YRBS/YTS survey revealed the following:

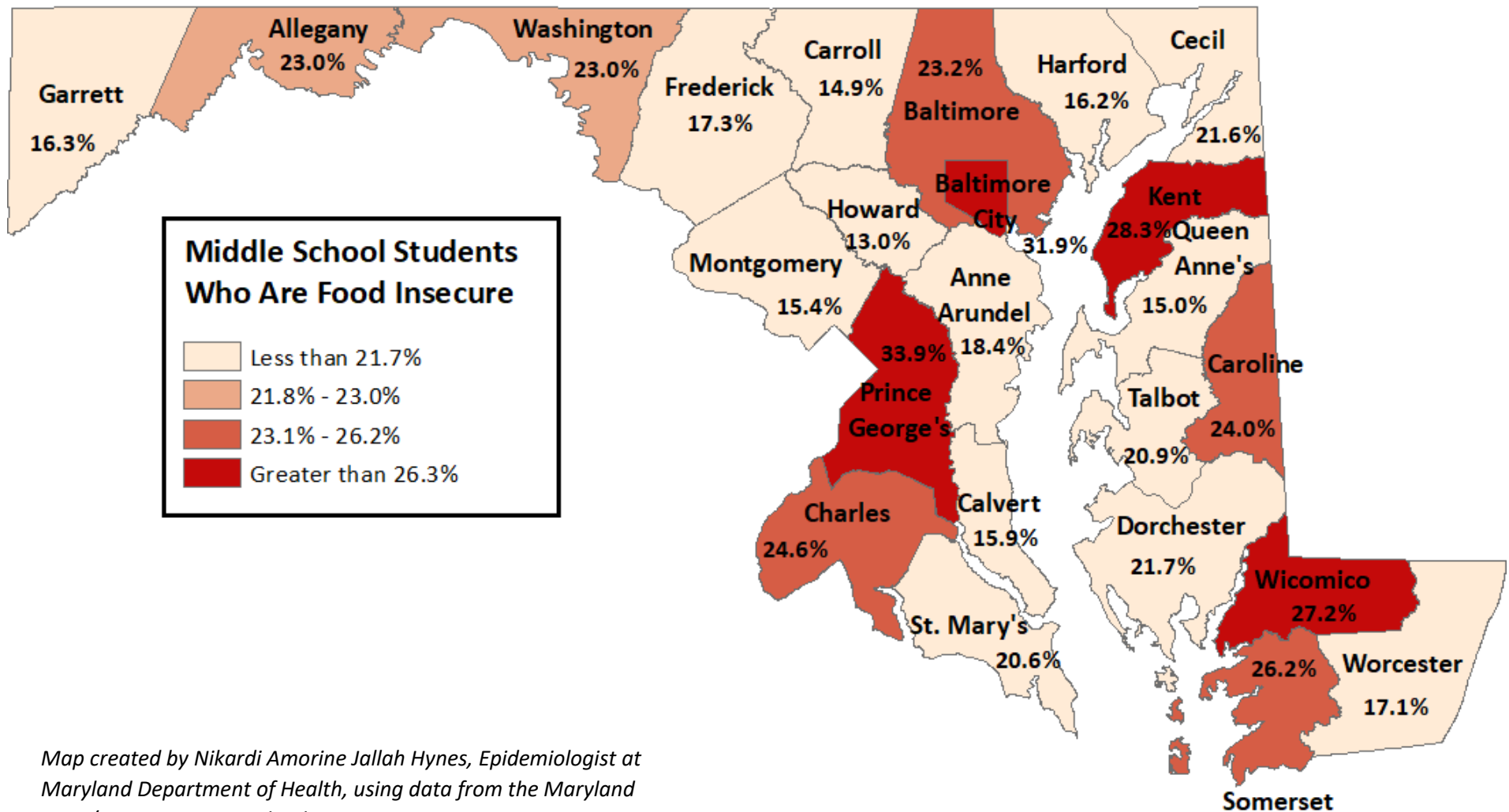
- On average, **22% of middle school students** and **20% of high school students** in Maryland experience food insecurity. While about 1 in every 5 secondary school students experience the lack of regular and consistent access to nutritious food, some students are at a much higher risk.
 - Compared to their Asian and white peers, students that are Hispanic, Latino, Black, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander are significantly more likely to lack reliable access to the food they need.
 - Where students live also impacts their risk for experiencing food insecurity. In Prince George’s County, 34% of middle school students experience food insecurity – nearly three times higher than the rate in neighboring Howard County.
 - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) high school students are about twice as likely to experience food insecurity.
- Food insecure students are more than 2 times as likely to experience poor mental health outcomes. Nearly 1 in every 3 high school students experiencing food insecurity have considered suicide.
- Food insecure students are significantly more likely to feel unsafe at school, to have been in a physical fight at school, and to carry a weapon to school.

Geographic Disparities in Food Insecurity Rates, Middle School Students

The YRBS/YTS survey found significant differences in food insecurity rates depending on where students live and attend school.

State-wide, 21.7% of middle school students are food insecure.

Food insecurity rates for middle school students are highest in Prince George's County (33.9%), Baltimore City (31.9%), Kent County (28.3%), and Wicomico County (27.2%).

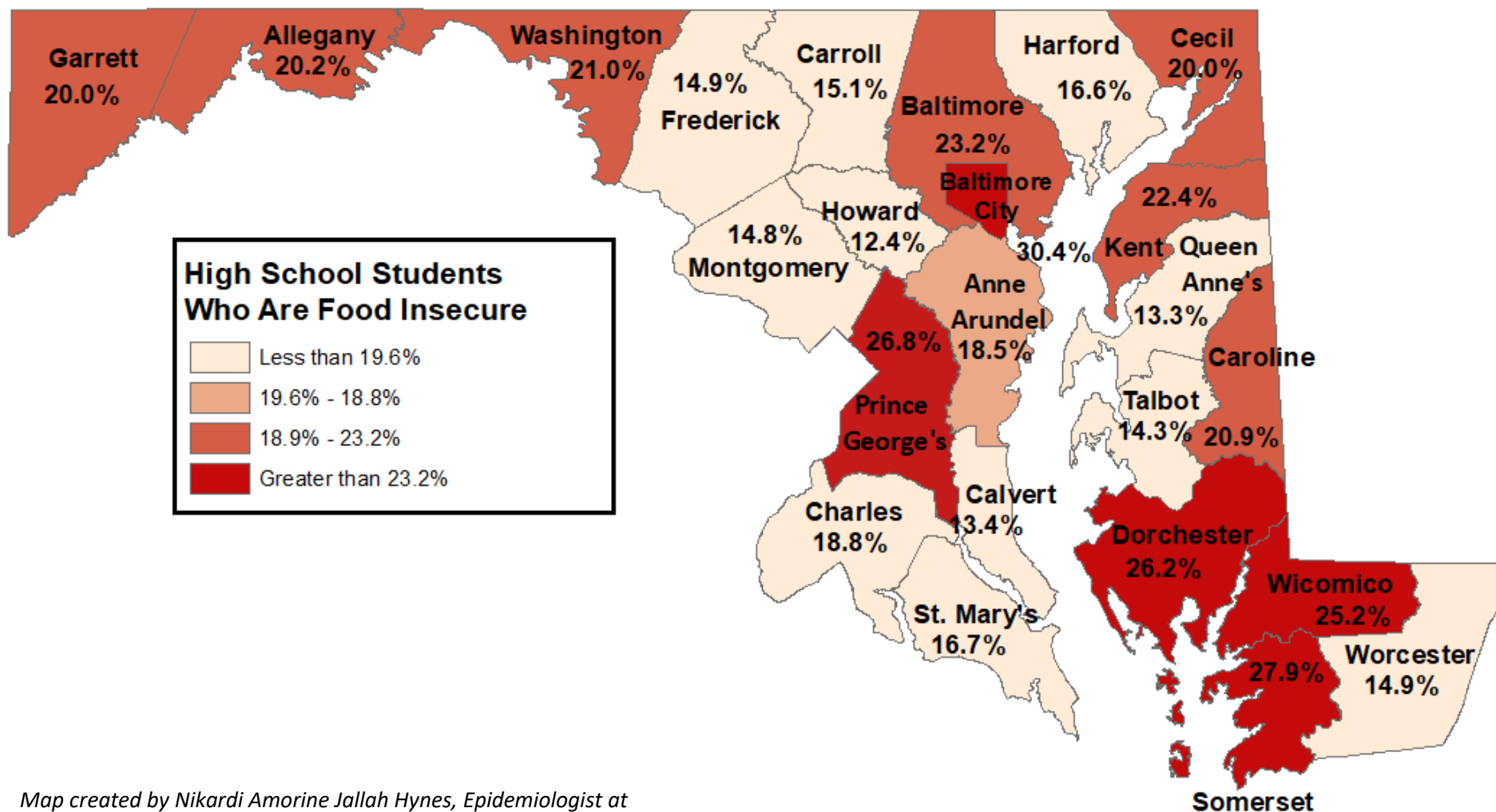


Map created by Nikardi Amorine Jallah Hynes, Epidemiologist at Maryland Department of Health, using data from the Maryland YRBS/YTS, 2021-2022 school year.

Geographic Disparities in Food Insecurity Rates, High School Students

State-wide, 19.6% of high school students are food insecure.

Food insecurity rates for high school students are highest in Somerset (27.9%), Prince George's (26.8%), Dorchester (26.2%), and Wicomico (25.2%) counties.



Map created by Nikardi Amorine Jallah Hynes, Epidemiologist at Maryland Department of Health, using data from the Maryland YRBS/YTS, 2021-2022 school year.

Food Insecurity Rates by School District and Grade

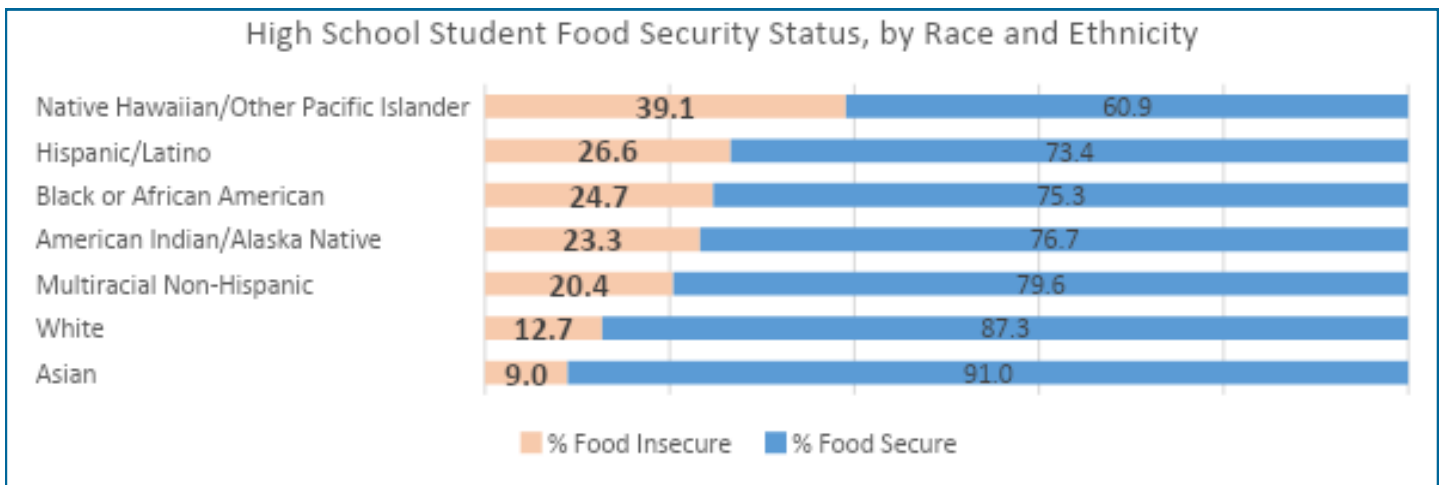
School District	Percentage of Middle School Students that are Food Insecure	Percentage of High School Students that are Food Insecure
Allegany	23.0%	20.2%
Anne Arundel	18.4%	18.5%
Baltimore City	31.9%	30.4%
Baltimore County	23.2%	23.2%
Calvert	15.9%	13.4%
Caroline	24.0%	20.9%
Carroll	14.9%	15.1%
Cecil	21.6%	20.0%
Charles	24.6%	18.8%
Dorchester	21.7%	26.2%
Frederick	17.3%	14.9%
Garrett	16.3%	20.0%
Harford	16.2%	16.6%
Howard	13.0%	12.4%
Kent	28.3%	22.4%
Montgomery	15.4%	14.8%
Prince George's	33.9%	26.8%
Queen Anne's	15.0%	13.3%
Saint Mary's	20.6%	16.7%
Somerset	26.2%	27.9%
Talbot	20.9%	14.3%
Washington	23.0%	21.0%
Wicomico	27.2%	25.2%
Worcester	17.1%	14.9%
State Average	21.7%	19.6%

Data source: Maryland YRBS/YTS, 2021-2022 school year.

Disparities in Food Insecurity Rates by Race and Ethnicity

The YRBS/YTS survey found that in 2021, an average of 22% of **middle school students** experience food insecurity. While 12% of Asian and 13% of white middle schoolers are food insecure, 32% of their Hispanic and Latino peers lack reliable access to healthy food. For Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander middle school students, 29% experience food insecurity.

Maryland **high school students** also experience significant disparities in food insecurity rates by race and ethnicity. Nearly 40% of all Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander high school students and about 1 in 4 Black and Hispanic/Latino high school students experience food insecurity. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander high school students have **more than four times** the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, as compared to white students.* African American, Hispanic, Latino, American Indian, and Alaska Native high school students experience **more than double the likelihood** of experiencing food insecurity, as compared to their white peers.*



Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Geography

In some Maryland school districts, including Calvert, St. Mary's, and Talbot counties, African American and Black high school students experience an even higher risk of experiencing food insecurity than the statewide averages summarized above. Similarly, while Hispanic and Latino high school students experience double the risk of their white peers, in Howard County these students have a **more than four times greater risk** of experiencing food insecurity as compared to their white peers.* Black and Hispanic/Latino students in Montgomery County high schools are **more than 10 times more likely to experience food insecurity**—the most significant disparity in the state.*

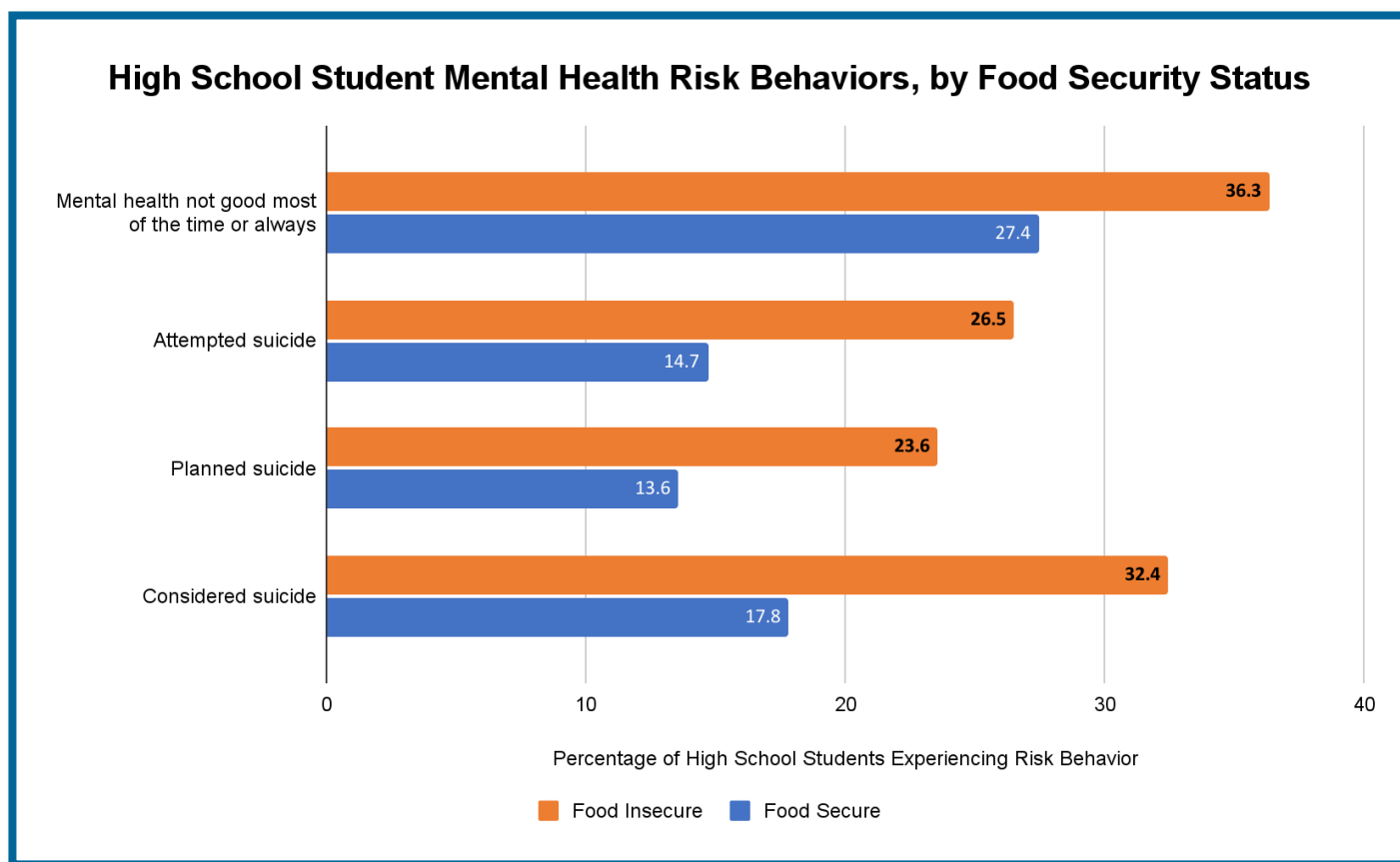
**Odds ratios are adjusted for age, race, ethnicity, grade, and sex and were calculated by Nikardi Amorine Jallah Hynes using data from Maryland YRBS/YTS, 2021-2022 school year.*

The Mental Health of Food Insecure Students

Many students — both those experiencing food insecurity and those who are not — report experiencing poor mental health. The 2021-2022 YRBS/YTS survey found an increase in the percentage of students reporting feeling sad or hopeless, experiencing suicidal ideation, and attempting suicide, as compared to the 2018-2019 survey.

While poor mental health is a concern for many students, it is even higher for students experiencing food insecurity. In fact, food insecure high school students are **more than 2 times** as likely to experience **poor mental health outcomes**. In 2021-2022, more than half of food insecure high school students (55.7%) report feeling sad or hopeless, as compared to 35.6% of their food secure peers.

The chart below summarizes the 2021-2022 YRBS/YTS mental health data for high school students experiencing food insecurity as compared to their food secure peers. Of particular concern are the **more than 1 in every 4 high school students experiencing food insecurity that have *attempted* suicide and the nearly 1 in 3 that have *considered* suicide.**



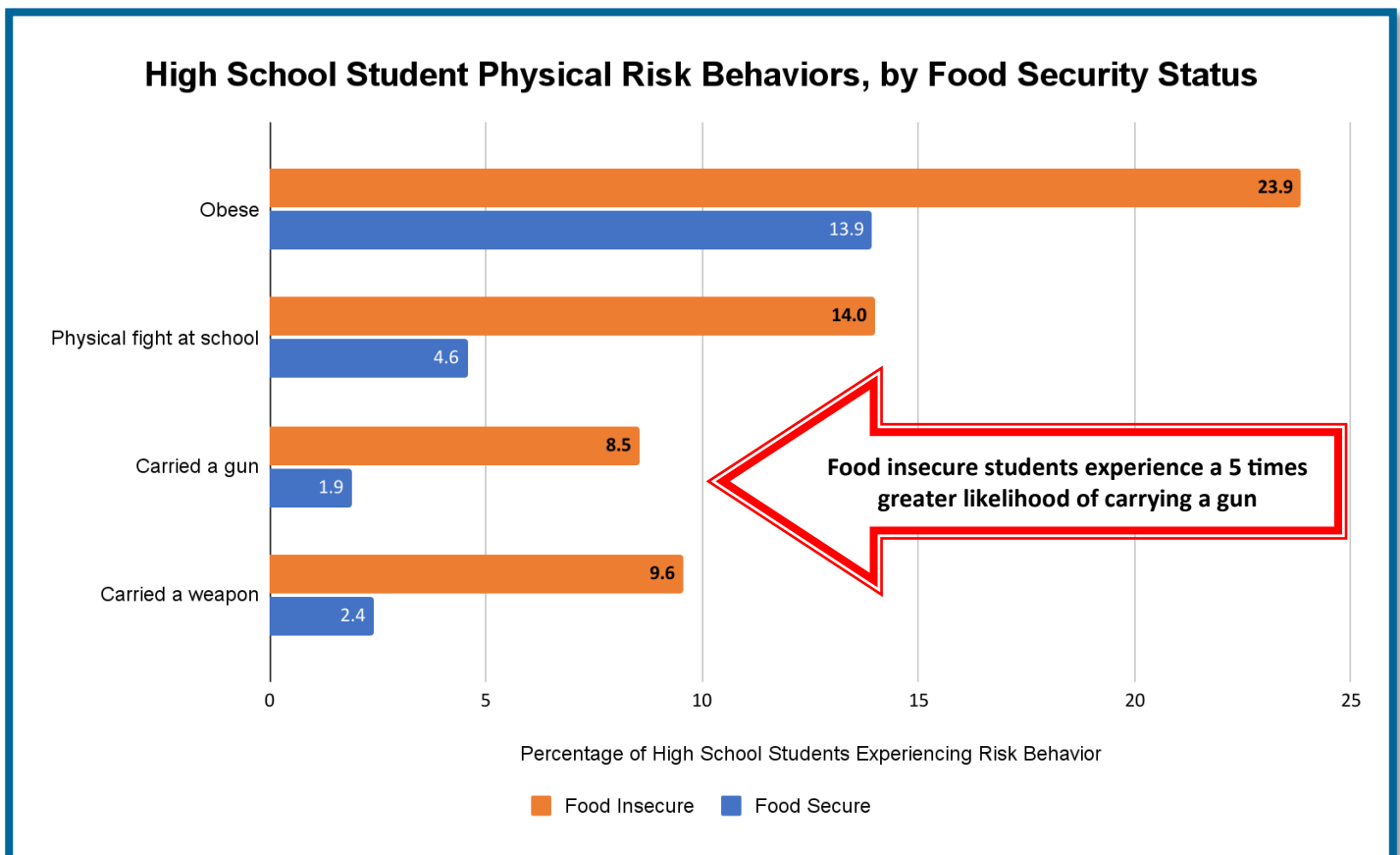
The Physical Health and Well-Being of Food Insecure Students

Food insecurity results in a higher likelihood of experiencing poor health outcomes and is a contributing cause of **health disparities** — the avoidable differences in health between groups that are caused by societal inequities, racism, and discrimination.

For example, the chart below illustrates that 23.9% of high school students experiencing food insecurity are obese, as compared to 13.9% of their food secure peers. People who are obese are more likely to be diagnosed with heart disease, stroke, cancers, and diabetes.

Measures of **physical safety** reveal that food insecure students are significantly more likely to feel unsafe at school, to have been in a physical fight at school, and to carry a weapon to school. In fact, calculations of odds ratios reveal that these physical safety risk factors have the greatest increased risk for students who are food insecure.

Of all the risk factors measured in the YRBS/YTS, the most significant increased risk for food insecure students was the risk of carrying a gun. Food insecure high school students are **nearly five times more likely to carry a gun**, as compared to their peers who are not food insecure.



Why are So Many Students Experiencing Food Insecurity?

Students experience food insecurity when their family has **limited or unreliable access to food**.

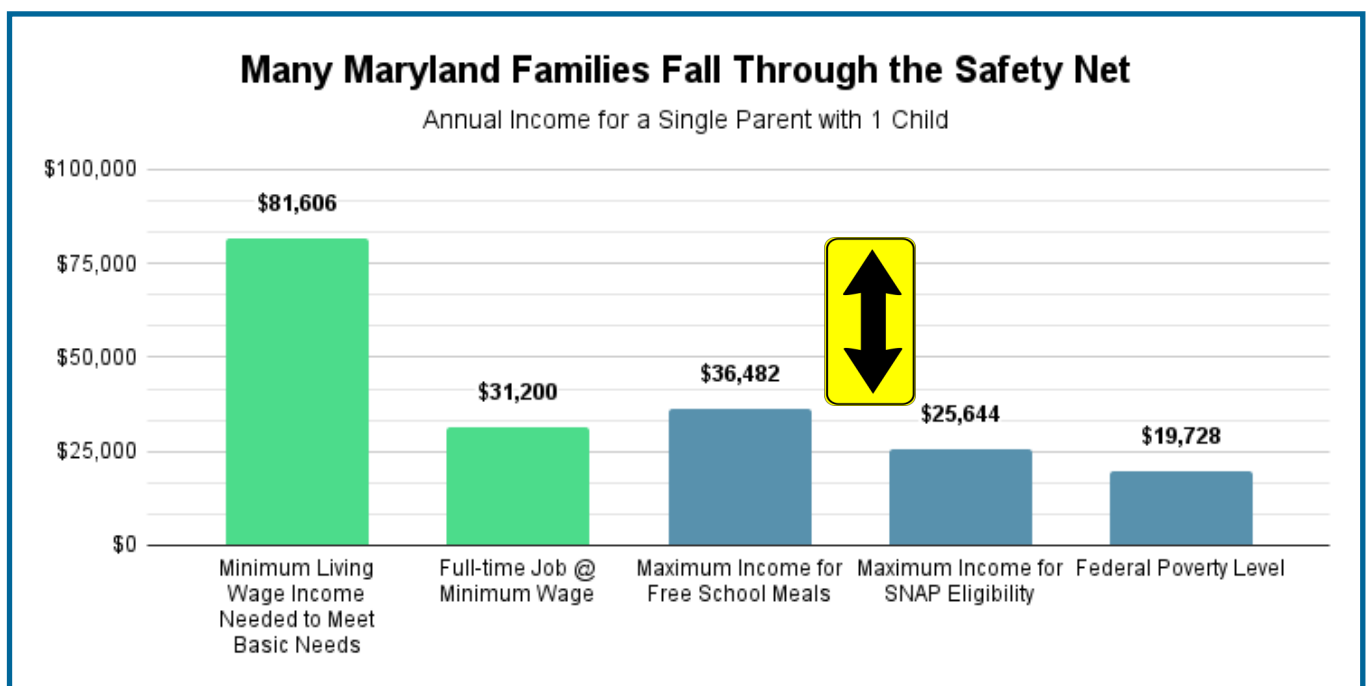
Policies and historical forces that **concentrate poverty** and **segregate communities by race** result in a higher risk for food insecurity for some students. One reason is that neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and racial segregation are more likely to **lack a grocery store**.

One of the most significant causes of food insecurity in Maryland is the fact the **minimum wage is not enough** to meet one's most basic needs. Even when working full-time, an annual income of \$31,200 is well below the income needed to support a child (<https://www.minimum-wage.org/maryland>). As a result, many working parents experience food insecurity.

Another key cause of food insecurity are the **gaps in the safety net**. As the chart below illustrates, many families earn too much to qualify for assistance from the safety net programs, yet don't earn enough to support themselves. For example, a single parent with one child that earns over \$36,482 annually does not qualify for free or reduced-priced school meals (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-020923>) or SNAP food assistance (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/recipient/eligibility>).

Given the **high housing costs** in our state, which average \$1,233 per month for a one bedroom, a full-time job that pays **at least \$23 per hour is needed to afford to live here** (reports.nlihc.org/oor/Maryland).

A single parent with one child needs an income of at least \$81,606 per year to meet their basic needs independently (<https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/24>).



No Child Should Ever Worry That Their Family May Run Out of Food

Support the following solutions, which are proven to reduce food insecurity for youth and children.

Summer SNAP for Children

This state and county-funded food supplement provides Maryland families with additional support during times when food insecurity spikes. During the summer months, schools are closed, school meals disappear, and childcare costs skyrocket. Summer SNAP for Children helps fill this gap by automatically adding to existing SNAP food assistance cards \$30+ per child, per summer month and an additional \$10+ per child during the winter.



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the federal program to help low-income households buy food. SNAP reduces food insecurity by 30% and reduces child poverty by 28%. Research also shows that SNAP increases high school graduation rates by 18% and lowers rates of obesity, heart disease, and stunted growth. More than 184,000 Maryland households with children receive SNAP benefits to help put food on the table (<https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/familywelfare/safety-net-research/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/>).

Towson University economists found that additional funding for Summer SNAP for Children will greatly benefit the economy while reducing food insecurity, creating additional jobs, and increasing tax revenues (<https://www.towson.edu/campus/partnerships-research/economic-studies/documents/resi-policy-brief-food-insecurity.pdf>). The cost to fully fund Summer SNAP for Children is just \$100 per child, per year, yet many eligible children have not yet been able to receive the benefit due to insufficient funding.

» Urge the Governor, legislators, and county executives to ensure that all qualified children from birth to age 19 receive this vital support from Summer SNAP for Children!

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)

Schools can offer universal school meals with CEP and reduce food insecurity for students and families while also improving test scores, attendance, and behavior (<https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2019.1679318>). During the 2022-2023 school year, 351 schools in Maryland were enrolled in CEP, including all schools in Baltimore City, Dorchester County, Somerset County, and Wicomico County (www.marylandpublicschools.org/programs/SchoolandCommunityNutrition/Pages/CEPData.aspx). In 2023-2024, Baltimore County Public Schools also opted to offer universal school meals in all schools by electing CEP. Hundreds of additional schools are also eligible, but not yet enrolled in CEP.

COUNTIES ELIGIBLE TO ELECT CEP DISTRICT-WIDE FOR ALL SCHOOLS & ALL STUDENTS:

*Allegany County
Caroline County
Cecil County
Garrett County
Kent County
Prince George's County
Talbot County
Washington County
Worcester County*

» Contact school administration to see if your school is eligible to participate in CEP or another universal school meal program!