



# Our Commitment to Addressing Rural Child Hunger



**Save the Children®**

## 2021 Annual Report

Yolanda Minor, State Director of Mississippi Programs, carries food boxes for local families at the farmer's market in Tallahatchie County. The boxes were provided by a local woman-owned farm and funded through a Save the Children feeding grant.

*Photo: Ashley Chisholm / Pioneer Productions*

## Introduction

Save the Children's vision is that all children in rural America have a healthy, strong foundation to thrive as learners and in life. Consistent access to nourishing food is required for this vision to become a reality. Hunger negatively affects a child's physical and cognitive development, preventing them from reaching their full potential. Children facing food insecurity are more likely to have lower math scores, repeat a grade, come to school late, or miss school entirely<sup>1</sup>. Kids can't be hungry for knowledge if they are hungry for food.

With our school and community partners, Save the Children works to meet the immediate need for food assistance and increase food access through the distribution of nourishing food, to strengthen government nutrition programs to meet the specific needs of rural communities, and to develop new, scalable solutions to combat rural child hunger.

## Ongoing Challenges in Rural Communities

The pandemic has affected access to education and food for children across the U.S. – especially in the rural, remote and high-poverty communities in which Save the Children works. In the United States, an estimated 1 in 6 children struggled with hunger in 2021<sup>2</sup>. Even before the onset of the pandemic, child hunger has always been worse in rural America: 90 percent of the counties with the highest percentage of children at risk for food insecurity were rural.

Families in rural communities have consistently faced economic instability, and a lack of resources can leave many families struggling to keep nourishing food on the table. The rural poverty rate has exceeded the urban poverty rate ever since the federal government began tracking both in the 1960s. In 2021, inflation reached a nearly 40-year high in the U.S., and rural households were some of the hardest hit. An analysis from Bank of America found that the purchasing power of rural households dropped 5.2 percent on an annualized basis, compared with 3.5 percent for urban households<sup>3</sup>. Beyond having lower incomes than their urban counterparts have, rural Americans also spent more money on the very goods that have seen the biggest price increases in 2021 – including food, energy, and transportation. Rural households spent an average of 30.9 percent of their household budget on these three categories, compared with 22.8 percent for urban households.

COVID-19 has also disproportionately impacted rural communities. Rural counties in persistent poverty have led the nation in the percentage of cumulative cases since September 2020<sup>4</sup>. As a result, school nutrition departments in rural schools – which have served as a community hub to address the growing food insecurity during the pandemic – struggled to overcome staff shortages and supply chain disruptions.



Whether sun or rain, Save the Children staff members in Kentucky help with food box distribution during COVID-19.

Photo: Save the Children

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<sup>1</sup> National Education Association (2021), *Student Success - Nutrition Programs*. <https://www.nea.org/student-success/smart-just-policies/funding-public-schools/nutrition-programs>.

<sup>2</sup> Feeding America (2021). *The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Security in 2020 and 2021*. [Food Insecurity and Poverty in the US - Feeding America](#).

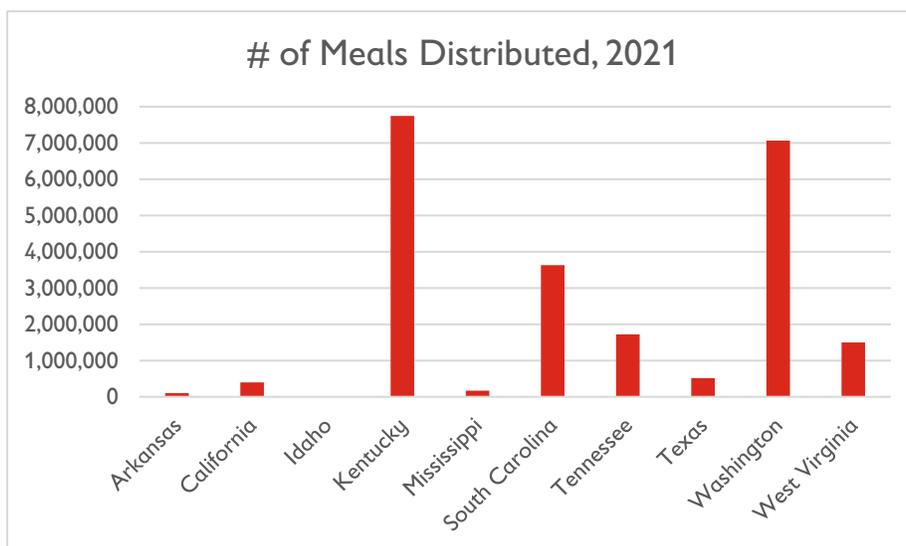
<sup>3</sup> Ivanova, I. (2021, December 2). *Inflation is hurting rural Americans more than city folk - here's way*. CBSNews. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/inflation-rural-households-non-college-grads-hardest>.

<sup>4</sup> USDA Economic Research Service (2022). *Rural America at a Glance: 2021 Edition*. [Persistently Poor Rural Counties Experienced Lower Employment Impacts from the Coronavirus Pandemic but Have Higher Cumulative COVID-19 Case Rates](#).

## Food Security Programs and Initiatives

In 2021, Save the Children supported various programs and initiatives to meet the immediate need for food assistance and strengthen the capacity of rural communities to ensure children and families had continued access to nourishing food. These initiatives, which are described in detail in the section below, included increasing food access through established and innovative community-led approaches, providing training opportunities and technical assistance to local leaders, and convening cross-sector stakeholders to share strategies and best practices to respond to the challenges facing rural communities. Together, through these efforts, Save the Children supported the distribution of **over 22 million meals to 244,171 children** in partnership with schools, food banks, and other community-based organizations to children in rural communities in Arkansas, California, Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia.

Save the Children supported the distribution of over **22 million meals** to more than **240,000 children** in **10 states**.



## Farmers to Families Food Box Program

Through the United States Department of Agriculture’s **Farmers to Families Food Box** pandemic-response program, Save the Children coordinated delivery of boxes filled with nourishing food to struggling families in rural communities. Food distributors sent refrigerated trucks of food boxes to our community-based partners, and families received the boxes directly from the back of the trucks right into their own vehicles’ trunks. This “truck-to-trunk” model allowed for the distribution of nourishing, perishable food in communities with limited cold storage and distribution capacity – a primary barrier to food access in rural communities.

In 2021, Save the Children facilitated the distribution of more than **400,000 USDA food boxes, valued at over \$13 million**, in rural communities in Kentucky, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. The boxes comprised of fresh fruits and vegetables, cooked meat, eggs, milk, and other dairy products, and the amount of food distributed was equivalent to **10.2 million meals**. This food reached **147,591 children** and their families.

In addition to delivery coordination, Save the Children provided the following support to partnering community-based organizations to ensure successful program implementation:

- Training and technical assistance on pre-implementation planning meetings that included topics such as food safety and impact tracking;
- Educational fliers on nutrition, learning activities, and social/emotional wellbeing to distribute with the food boxes;
- Template recruitment flier to let families know when boxes would be distributed;
- Media release templates; and
- Verbiage for Public Service Announcements and social media posts.

Click [here](#) to see a video with more information about the impact of the Farmers to Families Food Box program.

## Mobile Learning and Feeding Units

Mobile programming is a key component of our strategy to address food insecurity and early learning. Mobile learning and feeding units (buses and vans) allow us to reach children and families living in remote, rural areas who are struggling with poverty and lack access to nourishing food and early learning resources in an innovative way. Mobile units reimagine program delivery options – reaching families ‘where they are’ by bringing meals, early learning activities and materials, and other services directly to their neighborhoods. This approach effectively mitigates the transportation and access barriers that are so prevalent in rural places.

In 2021, Save the Children, with our partners, launched **four new mobile learning and feeding units**. With the addition of these new mobile units, we maintained a fleet of seven mobile units in 2021, two of which are solely dedicated to food security. We will be adding multiple new mobile units across the rural U.S. in 2022. These units serve diverse rural communities across the U.S.:

- Stone County, AR (mobile feeding unit only);
- Lake Los Angeles, CA (launched in 2021);
- Perry County, KY;
- Whitley County, KY (mobile feeding unit only);
- Quitman County, MS (March 2022);
- Orangeburg County, SC (2021);
- Cocke County, TN (2021);
- Morgan County, TN (2021);
- Grays Harbor County, WA (January 2022);
- Lake Quinalt, WA (February 2022);
- Yakima County/Grandview, WA (February 2022); and
- Calhoun and Gilmer Counties, WV (2022).



The Mobile Learning and Feeding Unit in Lake Los Angeles, CA, will support food distributions and family engagement, kindergarten readiness, and early education activities.

*Photo: Save the Children*

The mobile units are adaptable and can be used to respond to the unique and evolving needs and challenges present in each host community. In Washington, for example, the local team is considering how to expand services by partnering with local Departments of Health to bring Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services into low-resource communities.

## Summer Feeding Initiatives



Kloe, 11, and her younger sister Aubree, 9, prepare a garden salad together with ingredients provided by Save the Children's meal kit in West Virginia.

*Photo: Amberlee Christy / Save the Children*

Summer should be a season of refreshing fun for kids. But the reality is that summer can be the hungriest time of the year for families with children. When school lets out, millions of children lose access to the school meals and healthy afterschool snacks they receive during the regular school year<sup>5</sup>.

This summer, Save the Children worked with community representatives to develop and implement projects to bring about the deepest impact on child hunger during the summer months. Emphasis was given to projects designed to increase the amount of nourishing food available to children, particularly fruits and vegetables. Many partners also included the distribution of educational materials alongside the food to further the project's impact and connection to learning. Save the Children **provided nearly \$1,000,000 in grants**, as well as technical assistance, to finance and ensure the success of the community-driven projects.

Communities often used funding from Save the Children in conjunction with federal waivers that allowed for service flexibility. The combined funding streams enabled communities to distribute food creatively, keeping children safe and well-fed during the ongoing pandemic. Food distribution projects included:

- Mobile meal distributions to central community locations;
- Pop-up pantries that distributed boxes of nourishing food in neighborhoods;
- Curbside drive-through meal distributions at schools and community-based organizations;
- Direct home delivery of meals;
- School food pantries to serve children attending summer school;
- Hot meals served to children attending summer school;
- Other congregate meal programs serving hot meals in community settings;
- Backpack meal programs to ensure children had access to nourishing food on weekends;
- Grocery voucher programs; and
- Partnerships with Farmers Markets to increase the quality of food distributed.

A video compilation of our summer feeding efforts is available [here](#).

In summer 2021, Save the Children provided nearly **\$1,000,000** to support the distribution of over **2.2 million meals** to more than **90,000 children** in partnership with schools, food banks, and other community-based organizations across **87 rural counties**.

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<sup>5</sup> Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report. Food Research and Action Center. July 2019. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/frac-summer-nutrition-report-2019.pdf>

## School and Community Program Year Grants

With the success of the grants supporting summer feeding projects, Save the Children continued our investment in community-driven solutions to rural hunger and **provided nearly \$500,000** in fall 2021 to support child hunger programming in schools, food banks, and other local organizations. Projects funded through the current Program Year 2021-2022 grants included an afterschool supper program, a backpack program, a grocery voucher program, mobile feeding programs, school food pantries, school breakfast programs, and a SNAP outreach and application assistance program. As during the summer projects, funded partners also received training and technical assistance from Save the Children to ensure successful project implementation.

Recognizing that local leaders and community-based organizations have the solutions but often lack the capital to address the causes of food insecurity in their communities, these grants fund communities to choose the projects and supports that best meet emerging or ongoing needs around child hunger and nutrition. While full program year results are not yet available, below is a success story from our food security work in fall 2021.

### Success Story: Independence County, Arkansas

A child hunger grant from Save the Children enabled Batesville School District to provide information and application assistance for the public Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program, stock up their food pantry with additional staple foods and fresh fruit, and hold seasonal events for families. The school district involved the junior high school students to sort and pack bags for their Thanksgiving drive-through distribution in November. They have held several events that addressed both food security and family literacy. For example, at various drive-thru food events for families in the community, they distributed family literacy materials in addition to food. Their *Books & Bushels* program also provided fresh fruits and vegetables bundled with literacy and educational materials. In total, during the project:

- 13,568 meals were distributed;
- Around 320 children were served;
- Educational resources were distributed with 95% of meals; and
- Interventions included food box distribution, school food pantries, and SNAP outreach.



Lorrie McClure, the School Nutrition Director, said that the drive-through and literacy events are great for her district and community. In addition to Federal McKinney Vento funding helping to identify homeless and food insecure families, teachers and counselors also notified her staff when they suspected families were struggling with hunger and food issues. Her team immediately distributed food and then helped to enroll vulnerable families in SNAP and to understand the SNAP process. The funding allows the district to always have food on hand to stock families' initial food boxes. Funding has been so beneficial in helping Batesville School District face food insecurity head on. The project is ongoing.

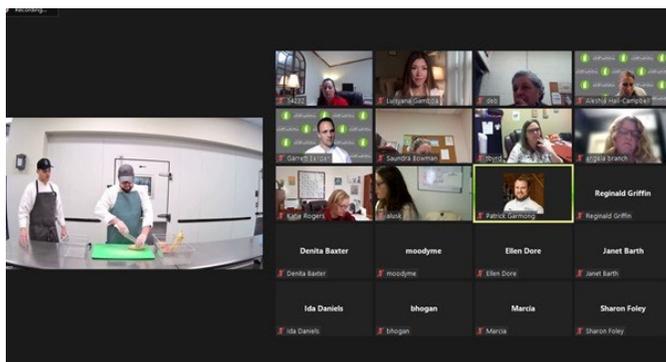
## Rural School Nutrition Directors Network

Making a deep impact on rural child hunger requires strengthening local capacity. In 2021, Save the Children launched the Rural School Nutrition Directors Network (RDN), the first-ever professional peer network tailored to the unique strengths, constraints and needs of rural school nutrition departments. The RDN aims to strengthen the capacity of rural schools to serve more and better quality food and reach more schoolchildren through training, technical assistance, and access to resources.

Free and open to any director of a rural school nutrition department, the RDN provides opportunities for members to share ideas, experiences and effective practices. The goals of the network are to increase participation in best practices, share resources to strengthen rural school food service delivery, and strengthen connections with other practitioners across America's rural communities.

In 2021, the RDN had **41 members from 14 states** including Arizona, Arkansas, California, Idaho, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Members met virtually on a monthly basis, benefitting from the following network services and activities:

- Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) through monthly webinars. Topics of discussion included increasing meal participation through innovative practices; increasing food service departments' financial viability; coping with supply chain constraints and staffing challenges; and making the most of the federal program waivers enacted during the pandemic. We also brought in experts to share information, including a USDA representative offering targeted TTA for the USDA's Farm to School Grant Program.
- Financial and other resources to equip members to address barriers and needs specific to their communities. This included **providing \$514,000 in grant funding** to purchase equipment to operate school feeding programs and establish best practices. Members received materials to celebrate School Nutrition Week in October, including cookbooks, nutrition information handouts, and educational posters. They also received PPE to equip them with necessities during the pandemic.
- Access to national professional development opportunities, including covering nearly \$2,000 in registration fees for the School Nutrition Association Annual Conference, the Child and Adult Care Food Program annual summit, and Food Research & Action Center/Feeding America's Policy conference.



Experts from the Institute of Child Nutrition provided a cooking demonstration during the November RDN meeting.

Photo: Save the Children

## Rural Accelerator Initiative

Save the Children's Rural Accelerator Initiative is an ambitious collective impact approach to achieving larger-scale, population-level results in rural communities. To achieve transformative change for children, we have incorporated the results-based collective impact into our U.S. Programs strategy, seeking to complement our established direct programs with a holistic approach that activates, aligns, and leverages community assets to address structural issues identified and prioritized by community members. A collective impact approach strengthens cross-sector collaboration among local stakeholders, building and enhancing the capacity of local coalitions by intentionally engaging and developing key leaders, co-

designing and delivering training and technical assistance to stakeholders, and aligning financial and strategic resources to support local efforts.

This approach, with integrated food security efforts, is currently piloted in four rural communities: Perry and Whitley Counties, Kentucky; Cocke County, Tennessee; and Yakima Valley, Washington. Each community has established local structures charged with developing, executing, and improving locally identified strategies to improve outcomes for children, focusing on kindergarten readiness and third grade academic proficiency. Addressing rural child hunger is a key strategy in each Collective Impact community for achieving their identified positive educational outcomes for children.

In 2021, Save the Children provided financial resources and training and technical assistance to support the development and implementation of food security strategies. In the example below, we have highlighted how Save the Children's food experts and Collective Impact in Cocke County, Tennessee, collaborated to make strides in increasing children's food security.

## Case Study: Cocke County, Tennessee

In Cocke County, Tennessee, Save the Children works closely with the **Cocke County Cradle to Career Coalition (C5)**, which seeks to accelerate progress toward cradle-to-career outcomes for children through proactive, collaborative engagement of community stakeholders. C5 serves as the lead institution for the Rural Collective Impact Initiative, and as such, is also focused on improving educational outcomes for all Cocke County students.

Understanding that coming to school with full bellies is key to children being able to learn and thrive, C5 embarked on a community planning process to work with the wider community to develop a Food Security Action Plan that addresses the most pressing needs in Cocke County. To kick off this process, Save the Children and C5 convened a **virtual Food Security Summit on September 14, 2021**. Twenty-five community stakeholders participated in this interactive session, including notable attendees like Cocke County Mayor, Crystal Ottinger. The aim of the session was to align on a shared vision and results to work towards around food security. Attendees engaged in a data walk, conducted a factor analysis to identify the issues that impact food security, identified existing gaps in resources, and shared ways to best communicate their work.

After much discussion, community stakeholders aligned on the following as a shared result they would commit to working towards: "All struggling households in Cocke County will replace the experience of food insecurity with food independence."

Exciting next steps are already in place to work towards this shared result. Save the Children is providing funding to hire a **local Food Security Coordinator** who will provide leadership in coordination and communication. In the coming months, the Food Security Coordinator will lead the C5 Food Security Working Group through a community assessment to better understand the local food security landscape. The insights from the assessment will feed into an action plan that is tailored to the needs of the community and works towards ensuring all people struggling with food insecurity in Cocke County are fed, educated, and have the ingredients they need to achieve food independence.

## Thought Leadership

Save the Children partners with national hunger relief organizations, like **No Kid Hungry**, **Feeding America**, and other entities interested in food security on summits, webinars, and similar events to provide thought leadership and create opportunities to exchange ideas within the field. In 2021, Save the Children co-convened or participated in six such events, bringing together rural leaders and practitioners and other stakeholders to share strategies to address rural child hunger. In the table below, we have shared brief descriptions of these six events:

Event Title	Event Date	Event Description
<b>Chobani Child Hunger Summit</b>	February 2021	This summit brought together advocates, changemakers, government officials, and social entrepreneurs to push for collective action to address America's child hunger crisis.
<b>No Kid Hungry Rural Child Hunger Summit</b>	March 2021	<b>No Kid Hungry's</b> third annual Rural Child Hunger Summit focused on the disparities driving child hunger in rural communities and identifying promising practices and policies that amplify impact of existing nutrition assistance programs or reduce the incidence of rural child hunger. The 2-day virtual summit brought speakers from Save the Children and our school and community partners, as well as other community organizations, to share and celebrate innovations that are community-based, user-centered, and evidence-informed.
<b>Food Insecurity in the U.S.: Exploring Causes and Solutions</b>	March 2021	Speaking at a <b>Berea College</b> Convocation, Save the Children's U.S. Food Security and Nutrition Advisor discussed hunger through the lenses of the pandemic and racial justice. The talk explored root causes and potential solutions, with a special emphasis on rural communities and both local and national level solutions, to educate college students on rural hunger.
<b>Rural Learnings Webinar</b>	September 2021	Co-hosted with <b>No Kid Hungry</b> , this webinar shared strategies and best practices from two local leaders to help rural leaders and practitioners overcome nutrition challenges in their communities during the pandemic. Save the Children and No Kid Hungry also shared themes from focus groups conducted with 14 rural community leaders across the country.
<b>Serving Rural Communities Webinar</b>	October 2021	Co-hosted with <b>Feeding America</b> , this webinar convened 78 participants to discuss and establish collaborative efforts in rural communities.
<b>A Full Plate: Food Security Summit</b>	October 2021	Convened by <b>CHILDREN AT RISK</b> , in collaboration with Texas Family Leadership Council, Save the Children, Houston Food Bank, and Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, this summit provided an opportunity for experts and community leaders to discuss legislation and critical supply chain challenges affecting, as well as solutions for, food insecurity.

## Advocacy

Government nutrition programs are integral to fight child hunger, yet don't reach everyone in need. That is why, together with our advocacy arm Save the Children Action Network (SCAN), we advocate for strengthening and expanding government programs to meet the needs of marginalized communities across the country. Advocacy is a major accelerator for change and is key to seeing our vision of affecting all children in rural America. Strong partnerships are key to this strategy, such as with Feeding America and Share Our Strength.

A significant win in 2021 was the inclusion of investments to mitigate hunger in the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Specifically, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits were boosted by 15 percent through September 2021. Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer benefits, which supplied food resources to families who have lost access to free or reduced-price school meals due to school closures, were also provided to school-age and young children for the summer and the program was extended through the end of the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Throughout 2021, there were other large pieces of domestic, child nutrition legislation moving in parallel to the ARP, including the Child Nutrition Reauthorization and the Build Back Better Act. Together with SCAN, we continued to advocate for modernizations, improvements, and expansions of the following child nutrition programs: WIC, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and national school meal programs. Our advocacy priorities ranged from improving program efficiencies from both the administrative and beneficiary perspective, to guaranteeing flexibilities in child nutrition programs, and much more. We look forward to leveraging the strides we made in 2021 on all child nutrition programs and drafts of legislation to keep momentum forward on these pieces of legislation, and more, to better serve all children in need.

## Looking Ahead

Children in rural communities across the country are struggling from inconsistent access to the food they need to learn, succeed, and thrive. In 2021, Save the Children and our partners worked together to help develop best practices and new solutions to address rural hunger. Our school and community feeding grants have been a huge success, and we are proud to have worked alongside partners in community-led efforts to distribute nourishing food to children in rural communities and remote areas when they need it most. We are exploring opportunities to support additional cycles of feeding grants in 2022 in an effort to expand our reach and serve more rural communities, particularly communities beyond those in our programmatic footprint.

Also in 2022, in line with the third pillar of our food security work to develop new solutions to combat rural child hunger, Save the Children anticipates launching a **Rural Child Hunger Innovation Lab** to identify and fund new and innovative practices for improving food security. Driven by our theory of change, Save the Children understands what it takes to make meaningful and lasting change – investing in locally driven and sustainable solutions that can be replicated in even the hardest to reach areas. The Rural Child Hunger Innovation Lab will enable Save the Children and partners to research, identify, develop and implement new scalable solutions to rural child hunger.