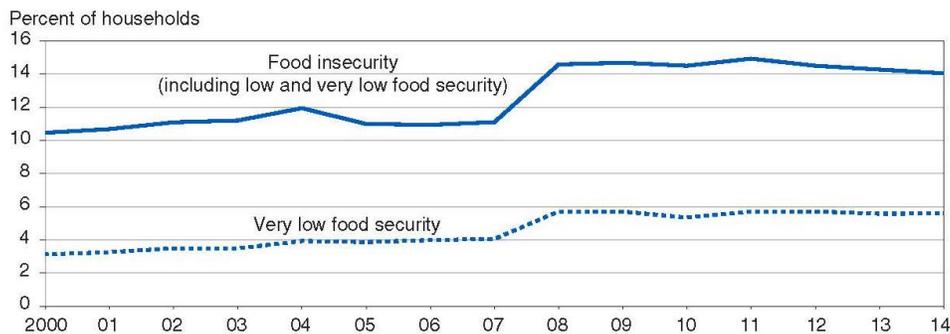


## Food for Everyone: A Collaboration to end Food Insecurity in La Crosse County

Most U.S. households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living – they are food secure. But a minority of American households experience food insecurity at times during the year, meaning that their access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. An estimated 14.0 percent of American households were food insecure at least some time during 2014 (Coleman-Jensen 2015).

The financial and economic crisis that erupted in 2008 caused a significant increase in hunger in the United States (Hunger in America: 2015). In 2008, coinciding with the start of the recession, national household food insecurity rates climbed to 14.6 percent, reflecting a 31 percent increase over the prior year (Hunger in America 2014). Food insecurity remains high in the United States. Though a minority, 17.4 million households experience food insecurity in America today.

**Prevalence of food insecurity in 2014 was essentially unchanged from 2013 and 2012, down from 2011**



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.

Food is a basic need, and essential for human life. Often low-income individuals and families experience food insecurity the most. Those struggling to keep food on the table often pay a heavy toll. The lack of adequate nutrition has a number of negative impacts on a community’s residents including: poor health, reduced productivity, learning disabilities, and an increased demand for social services. Food and nutrition programs are critical to the health and well-being of low-income adults and children. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP “is the nation’s most important anti-hunger program. In 2014, it helped 46 million low-income Americans afford a nutritionally adequate diet” (Hunger in America: 2015).

The prevalence of hunger and food insecurity varies from state to state. “Prevalence rates for 3 years, 2012-2014, were averaged to provide more reliable statistics at the state level” (Coleman-Jensen 2015). The estimated prevalence of food insecurity during this 3-year period for Wisconsin was 11.4 percent.

In Wisconsin, SNAP is called FoodShare. FoodShare was created to help stop hunger and improve nutrition and health for individuals and families. FoodShare helps people with limited incomes buy the food they need for good health and helps to reduce their reliance on emergency pantry food to meet their food needs. Currently, more than 22,000 people in La Crosse County are eligible for FoodShare, but only 60.0 percent of them participate in this program. Barriers to program participation include lack of knowledge about the program, burdensome paper applications, and difficulty navigating the online application process. The elderly and limited English proficiency populations are especially vulnerable to these barriers.

In La Crosse County  
**40%** of those eligible  
do not participate  
in FoodShare

The La Crosse County FoodShare Outreach initiative began in the spring of 2015, and is a collaborative effort between Couleecap, the La Crosse County Human Services Department, and The Hunger Task Force of La Crosse. The purpose of the FoodShare Outreach initiative is to improve the effectiveness of our local food system by addressing and solving food insecurity issues through transforming local practices and increasing access to healthy, nutritious food. The principle that is first and foremost at the heart of the project is that no adult, child, or family in the La Crosse area should go hungry. The second principle is that we should work together to ensure that emergency food resources are preserved for those who do not have access to an otherwise more sustainable food source, such as FoodShare. The third principle guiding this initiative is that of self-sufficiency; the FoodShare Outreach initiative also helps families become more self-sufficient by linking them to employment and job training opportunities and connecting them to other area resources.

Couleecap employs the FoodShare Outreach Coordinator and Programs Manager to oversee this project. Through this project she trains and equips food pantries and other agencies to assist individuals in applying for FoodShare benefits through ACCESS, Wisconsin’s online application system for food and healthcare benefits. She works closely with the local Income Maintenance (IM) program, and trains and oversees volunteers who assist in the outreach and access efforts.

Individuals served through the FoodShare Outreach initiative live in various neighborhoods and communities throughout La Crosse County. They are people of all ages and races and ethnicities who have jobs but have low incomes, are living on small or fixed incomes, have lost their jobs, or are disabled and are not able to work.

#### **FoodShare Outreach in Action**

At a senior food site, the FoodShare Outreach Coordinator and Programs Manager met Alice, an elderly woman who was struggling to have enough food to eat on a daily basis. Although Alice took advantage of the senior meals, she was still food insecure and often the only meal she ate in a day was the one provided at the senior site. She was disabled and had very limited ability to go to a food pantry. She was not comfortable with computers but wanted to enroll in the FoodShare Program. The Coordinator sat next to Alice and helped her enter her information into the ACCESS program. With encouragement, Alice was able to complete her FoodShare application and qualify for benefits. Without the encouragement of the Coordinator, Alice would have gotten frustrated with the program and probably quit the application, as there were numerous times in the process an “exasperated” Alice asked the Coordinator for clarification of questions or assistance with entries. However, upon completion of the application Alice was pleased she would be able to have more food to eat.

The overall community benefits from this initiative by seeing a successful decrease in the number of people who need to rely on emergency pantry food to meet their food needs. Not only does this help to decrease food insecurity for families in La Crosse County, but it also has a significant positive economic impact in the county by reinvesting FoodShare benefits back into the local economy. “Together, charitable food assistance and federal nutrition assistance programs weave a nutritional safety net for households in need” (Hunger in America 2014).

## You Can Help, Too

Each of us has the power to help people find a way out of poverty. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – [www.wiscap.org](http://www.wiscap.org); Couleecap – [www.couleecap.org](http://www.couleecap.org); Institute for Research on Poverty – [www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp).
- Educate yourself about food insecurity and hunger.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about hunger and poverty issues.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Make a donation to Couleecap’s FoodShare Outreach initiative. The primary funding for this project comes from the government through the La Crosse County Human Services Department. However, to access these funds, we need to secure an equal amount of local funds to meet the funder requirements. Please consider a donation to help us meet this challenging goal.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are People Helping People, and every day our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business, employment, transportation, and health. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 31,000 people work towards self-sufficiency. Visit our website at [www.couleecap.org](http://www.couleecap.org) or like us on Facebook.

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