



Red, White,
and Blue Book

**NATIONAL SURVEY
OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES
FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES**

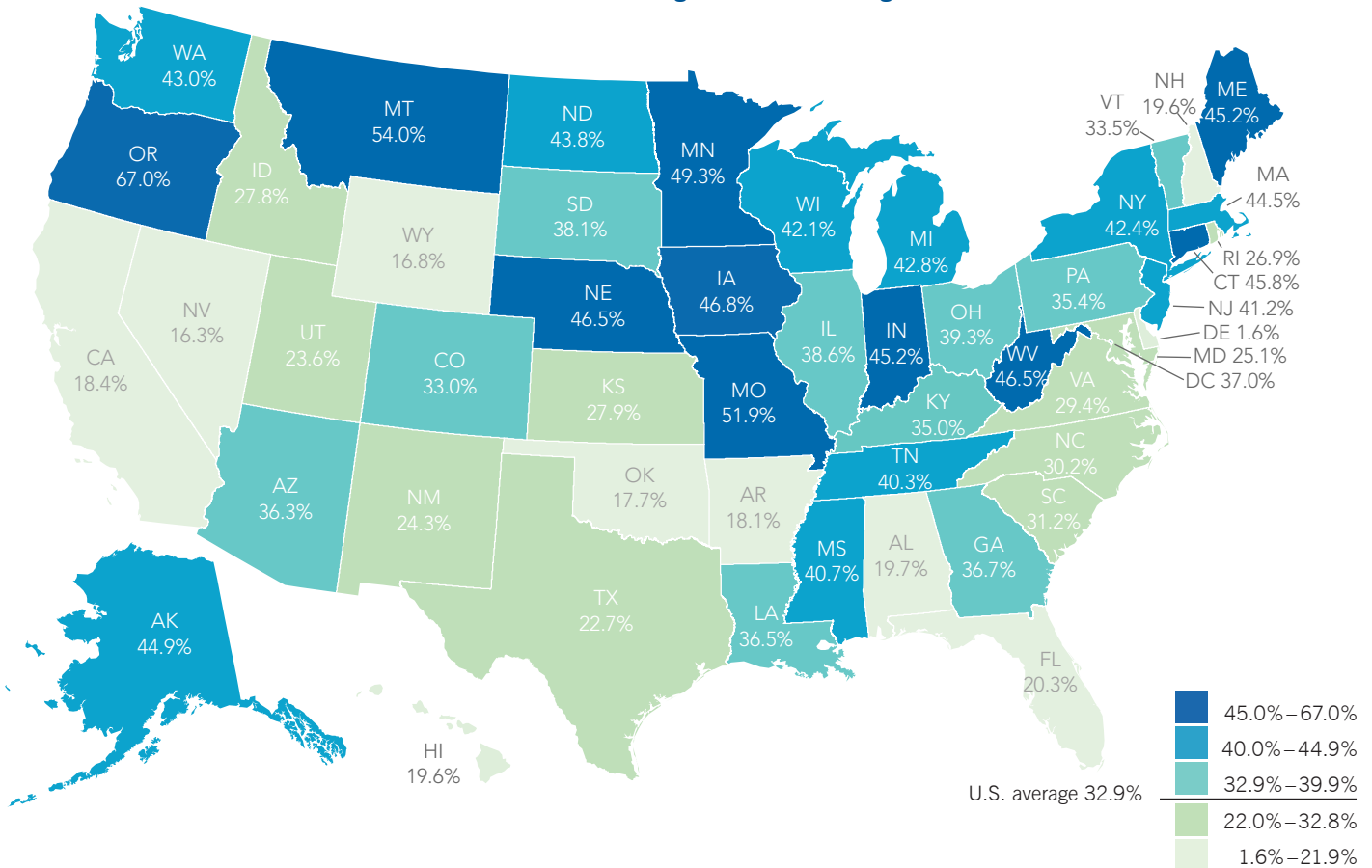
Food Insecurity and Homeless Families: A Case of Missed Opportunity

In 2009, approximately 1.4 million homeless households accessed emergency food assistance through the Feeding America network of pantries and partner agencies. One in three of the 14.5 million client families had to choose between enough food and at least one other everyday necessity such as utilities (46%), rent or mortgage (40%), or medicine or medical care (34%). Due to their low income and housing instability, homeless families and

individuals experience far higher levels of food insecurity than their housed or economically disadvantaged counterparts.

Studies have shown that homeless households who regularly stay in shelters or are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) have decreased food insecurity. Therefore, the current U.S.

Percent of Adults Exiting Shelter Receiving SNAP Benefits (2009)

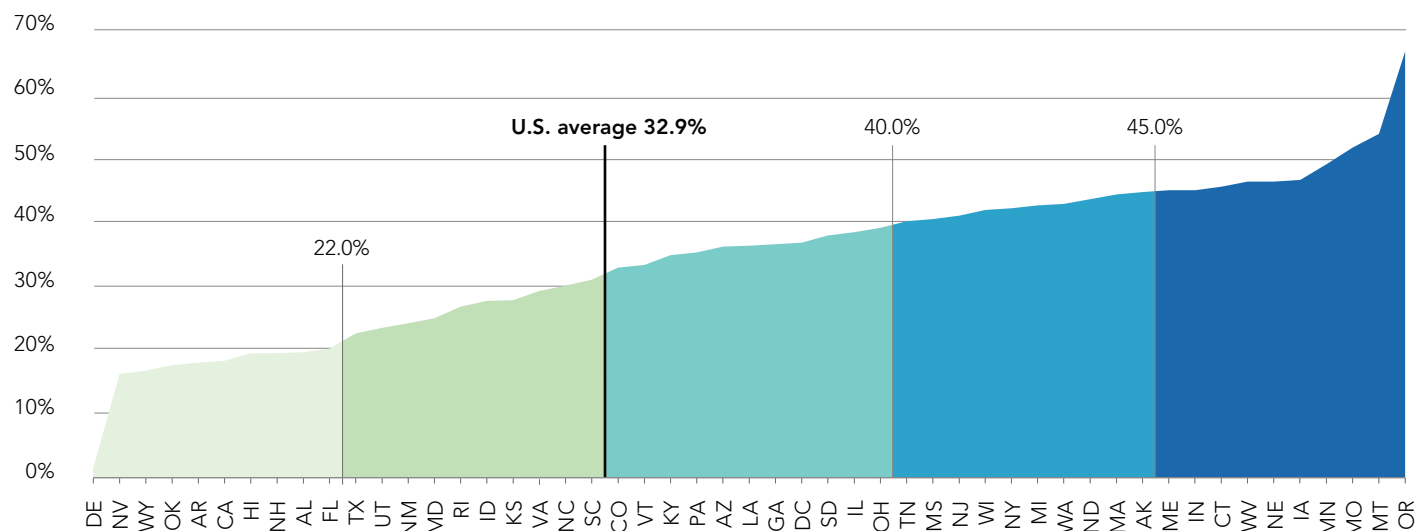


Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009 *Exhibit 1 Continuum of Care (CoC) Application*.

Data are classified using quintiles.

on the Homefront

Percent of Adults Exiting Shelter Receiving SNAP Benefits (2009)



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Interagency Council on Homelessness’ strategy of connecting homeless families to mainstream benefits rather than specialized supportive services appears well informed. However, according to 2009 Continuum of Care application data on SNAP, the current situation reflects a missed opportunity. Only 32.9% of adults leaving the Supportive Housing Program (SHP), the Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation for Single Room Occupancy Dwellings Program (SRO), or Shelter Plus Care (S+C) are enrolled in SNAP. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development collects information on the overall homeless population, but not homeless families or other subpopulations. Nearly all homeless families are presumably eligible, particularly with greater loss of income as a result of the present economic downturn. Unfortunately, there is a lack of attention on assuring that eligible families register with SNAP.

Interstate variation in SNAP participation of homeless adults exiting SHP, SRO, or S+C is large, with rates ranging from 1.6% (in Delaware) to 67.0% (in Oregon). Organizing the 50 states and the District of Columbia into quintiles—separating states in numerical order of percentages into five, equally sized groups of 10 (except for the middle group, which contains 11)—reveals that the top 31 states have enrollment rates higher than the national average of 32.9% and the bottom 20 exhibit percentages lower than this average. While 45.2%–67.0% of exiting clients in the top 10 states are registered, only 1.6%–20.3% in the bottom 10 states receive benefits.

Without improved and more transparent data collection that separates families and individuals, government cannot assess strengths and weaknesses in SNAP administration or be held accountable for its mainstream-services-oriented strategy. A lack of consistent, publicly available data leaves this approach’s potential success unknown and methods for increasing enrollment rates cannot be developed. Evaluation is necessary to show how subpopulations are connected with SNAP across jurisdictions and replicate successful models.

Even if homeless families are connected to all mainstream services for which they are eligible, there is still work to be done. Many low-income families find that SNAP is insufficient to meet their nutritional needs; 41% of Feeding America’s food services client households receive SNAP. Homeless families need more assistance than their low-income counterparts, as multiple mainstream benefits are insufficient to pay for housing, medical care, food, and other basic necessities. To lift themselves out of homelessness and attain self-sufficiency, homeless families further require education, employment training, and other supportive services. ■

Feeding America, *Hunger in America 2010: Executive Summary*; Barrett A. Lee and Meredith J. Greif, “Homelessness and Hunger,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 49, no. 1 (2008): 3–19; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009 Exhibit 1 Continuum of Care (CoC) Application; U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs),” <http://www.fns.usda.gov>; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*.