

# The Need for Food Among Native American Communities in Oklahoma

Prepared by  
Felipe Oyarzo, Kathy Hoppe,  
Trixi Asher, Chris Harrison,  
Francisca Oyarzo, & Riley Suiter

July 2023



**ROGERS STATE**  
**UNIVERSITY**  
POVERTY, FAMILY AND  
TRAUMA RESEARCH CENTER





# Abstract

The objective of this paper is to ascertain pertinent factors related to the necessity of sustenance among economically disadvantaged Native American individuals residing in Oklahoma. A reevaluation of contemporary scholarly literature and dialogues with two Oklahoma tribes have indicated that the dietary requirements within Native American communities are comparable to those observed within other low-income populations, particularly in rural regions of the United States. This paper presents an analysis of the primary causes linked to food insecurity among Native communities, along with recommendations for the development of effective policy interventions. The report underwent evaluation by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Division (IRB) of the University of Oklahoma.

*Key words:* Hunger, food, tribes, Native Americans, poverty, Oklahoma, food deserts, transportation, isolation, economy, low-income, rural communities, socioeconomic factors.

# Method

To mitigate any bias, a comprehensive literature review was conducted by a team of three researchers, who consulted the databases of the University of Oklahoma and Rogers State University to gather relevant reports and publications. Telephone interviews were conducted with Chickasaw and Cherokee Nations.

**Suggested citation:** Oyarzo, F., Hoppe, K., Asher, T., Harrison, C., Oyarzo, F., & Suiter, R. (2023). *The Need for Food among Native American Communities in Oklahoma*, (Report No. 1), Poverty, Family, and Trauma Research Center, Rogers State University. <https://www.rsu.edu/academics/schools-departments/school-arts-sciences/department-psychology-sociology/research-center/publications/>



# Introduction:

## What is the need for food among low-income Native American communities in Oklahoma today?

To address this issue, we need to determine if the dietary needs of low-income Native Americans in Oklahoma differ from those of other economically disadvantaged groups in the state, such as Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, immigrants, and individuals who are ill or have a disability. Is there a specific set of dietary requirements that apply only to Native Americans, or are they similar to those of other demographic groups? The demand for food appears to be comparable among diverse communities throughout the state due to three primary factors: 1) the financial capacity to acquire food; 2) the ability to access food-providing establishments based on geographical proximity; and 3) transportation availability, which enables individuals to reach locations where food is obtainable, or in the case of a person with a disability, illness, and elderly individuals, having a caregiver who is willing and able to procure food on their behalf. However, it is important to note that the Native American populations in Oklahoma are also affected by these three variables. Families and communities characterized by a strong feeling of collective support demonstrate a propensity to collaborate in the pursuit of securing essential sustenance for their households. According to Bardenhagen et al. (2017), populations residing in remote and less connected regions face more challenges in accessing food resources.

### Challenges to food security:

- Decreased financial capacity
- Inability to access food in remote locations
- Lack of available transportation







# Literature Review

The United States government drafted and signed treaties with Native Americans that stipulated the government would adhere to the responsibility of supplying food resources. The Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868 included provisions for the government to supply food to Plains Indian tribes. A multitude of agreements yielded food products that exhibited diminished nutritional quality, prioritizing affordability, and extended shelf life over dietary value. The sustenance allocated to Native Americans and Alaskan Natives came to be recognized as commodities, encompassing tinned meats (pork, chicken, and beef), an assortment of tinned fruits and vegetables, dehydrated eggs, flour, and cornmeal. There is a potential correlation between some policies pertaining to tribal food resources and the prevalence of contemporary food insecurity among American Indian and Alaskan Native communities. Nevertheless, recent studies indicate that present-day poverty is primarily influenced by various factors, including economic, familial, educational, and social elements, rather than solely relying on historical factors. Alternatively, it is suggested that these factors may not be the most dominant contributors to the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty (Oyarzo et al., 2023). The ongoing discourse pertains to the realms of philosophy and politics, rather than being strictly confined to scientific inquiry.

According to Blue Bird et al. (2017), survey data suggests that a substantial number of American Indians, specifically around 56%, have reported experiencing insufficient food quantity, while approximately 62% have reported inadequate food quality. According to a recent survey conducted by Feeding America (2021), it has been found that a significant proportion of Native American individuals, specifically 25%, have food inequities. The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) in Oklahoma offers USDA commodities to low-income households residing on Indian reservations. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a Request for Applications (RFA) in January 2021 for the FDPIR 638 Self-Determination Project. It is necessary to fulfill the FDPIR requirements, which are similar to the guidelines established for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). According to Maillacheruvu (2022), the average monthly participation in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) during the fiscal year of 2019 was 83,800.





There appears to be an elevated susceptibility to poverty and food insecurity among Native Americans residing on reservations. Various factors contribute to the issue of food uncertainty, including the geographical distance separating residences from food distribution hubs or retail establishments, limited access to transportation, and insufficient financial resources to procure food (Maillacheruvu, 2022). Although the number is slightly lower, Native Americans living in urban areas still face challenges related to food insecurity. Presently, a significant level of food insecurity is prevalent among many American Indian groups residing in the state of Oklahoma. According to the study conducted by Nam et al. (2015), a prevalence rate of 16% was observed for food insecurity among American Indian families residing in Oklahoma. Jernigan et al. (2017) indicate that the prevalence of inadequate access to food among members of the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations has shown an upward trend in recent years. The study examined 513 individuals from both tribes and found that more than 56% of tribal members faced challenges in obtaining sufficient food, while 62% cited concerns regarding the quality of the food available to them. Similarly, this study demonstrates a positive correlation between food insecurity and the prevalence of diabetes, indicating that individuals experiencing food insecurity are twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes compared to those who have consistent access to food.



Therefore, a different study conducted by Jernigan et al. (2017) revealed that, based on data obtained from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, an important percentage of American Indians, amounting to 25% on a national scale, experience persistent food insecurity. The United States Department of Agriculture provided comparable numbers in the year 2022. Similar occurrences have also been described by many individual tribes. According to a case study conducted by the National Congress of American Indians (2020), the Osage Nation reservation is characterized as a food desert, which significantly influences the decision-making process regarding food selection in a manner that is less conducive to overall well-being. According to the source, the lack of an adequate public transportation system and limited access to only four grocery stores, which frequently lack fresh produce, contribute to the prevalence of unhealthy dietary choices among the local population. According to the study, a significant proportion of adults in Osage County, specifically 88.2%, failed to consume the recommended daily intake of five servings of fruits and vegetables.





## Literature review (contd.)

In accordance with a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2014, Native Americans had significant constraints in terms of food accessibility. The findings of this research indicate that a significant number of Native American households, namely over 75%, resided at less than one mile from a supermarket. It was observed that access to a vehicle was limited for just 52% of the families included in the study. Additionally, it was observed that households belonging to the 80th percentile resided at distances of up to 8 miles from the closest supermarket. The survey also reported that most families residing on Native American reservations, specifically 52%, do not possess a car. Furthermore, it revealed that a significant proportion of these households, the majority, in fact, reside at a distance beyond 10 miles from the closest grocery. According to a study conducted by Hunger Free Oklahoma in 2020, it was determined that within the food insecure areas of Oklahoma, approximately 32 out of the total 77 rural counties can be classified as food deserts. It was observed that nine of these counties face challenges in terms of accessing sufficient charitable organizations that can provide assistance in addressing their food insecurity. According to the aforementioned body, one of the challenges in addressing this issue pertains to the arduous task of providing services and resources to geographically remote and isolated regions. Regarding the case study of the Osage Nation, it is worth noting that a significant portion of the reservation is situated in a rural and remote location. This geographical characteristic contributes to the prevailing issue of food insecurity experienced by the community members.

## Conversations with the Cherokee and the Chickasaw Nations

The Cherokee Nation conveyed to the Poverty, Family, and Trauma Research Center at Rogers State University their perspective on the similarity between the food requirements of low-income Native Americans in Oklahoma and those of other socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, particularly in rural regions. The food distribution center of the Chickasaw Nation has identified that tribal members with a disability, socially isolated persons, and Native Americans without access to transportation exhibit a greater level of food insecurity compared to the general population. The individual's perception aligns with contemporary research findings that have previously found analogous elements among different populations (Oyarzo et al., 2023). The specialized literature consistently addresses several concepts related to the food requirements of low-income populations, including but not limited to food deserts, transportation challenges, and social isolation.





## Results

Upon conducting consultations with the Cherokee and the Chickasaw Nations and thoroughly examining contemporary scholarly literature pertaining to hunger, it was determined that there are no significant disparities in terms of food requirements between American Indians and other socioeconomically disadvantaged populations residing in Oklahoma. The primary determinants contributing to food insecurity among Native Americans residing in Oklahoma are presently as follows, ranked in descending order of significance: There are several factors that contribute to food insecurity. Firstly, individuals may have a lack of resources to purchase food due to their low income. Secondly, the distance between residences and stores or food distribution centers may be substantial, making it difficult for individuals to obtain food. Additionally, a lack of familial support can further exacerbate the issue. Furthermore, isolation, particularly among vulnerable populations such as children, seniors, individuals with a disability, those who are unwell, and single adults, can contribute to food insecurity. Lastly, a lack of transportation options can hinder individuals' ability to obtain food.







# Considerations for Policymaking and Action Projects

Given the accepted observation that Native Americans, like other low-income groups, experience a need for food, it stands to reason that the strategies employed to address this issue should align with those that are frequently used to assist other disadvantaged populations. Based on recent research conducted by Oyarzo et al. (2023), the primary emphasis of policymakers appears to be on enhancing the economy through various means such as increasing employment availability, raising salary levels, and fostering greater prospects for investment and entrepreneurship. From a macroscopic standpoint, an advantage of prioritizing the provision of food to all marginalized populations is the potential for widespread implementation of such programs across many areas. Given that economic development is achieved through the involvement of various stakeholders, it is imperative for programs aimed at promoting economic growth in both rural and urban areas to prioritize the facilitation of economic and social development among these heterogeneous groups. Rural villages specializing in agriculture can provide locally sourced animal and agricultural products, whilst urban cities can offer a diverse range of services and goods. It is imperative for local and state governments to allocate resources towards fostering entrepreneurship, ensuring access to water for both agricultural and potable reasons, and facilitating the overall development of these areas. Within the OECD countries, including Chile, there exist instances wherein the government endeavors to foster rural development in specific regions such as Yaquito, located in the southern part of Chile. This is achieved through the provision of solar panels, seeds, and water resources, primarily intended for agricultural utilization. These projects have demonstrated efficacy, particularly within indigenous Chilean communities.



## **Microscopic level:**

- Increase employment availability
- Raise salary levels
- Foster opportunities for investment & entrepreneurship

## **Macroscopic level:**

- Prioritize food availability to marginalized populations
- Promote economic growth in rural areas
- Allocate resources to foster entrepreneurs



# Considerations (contd.)

Since its establishment in 2008, the [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](#) (FDPIR) has been authorized to operate until 2023. However, in order to continue its operations beyond this timeframe, the program requires renewal accompanied by necessary modifications. An area of study that warrants additional investigation is the endeavor to advance the prospects of Indian country by focusing on food, agriculture, infrastructure, and Economic Development (Hipp et al., 2018). This initiative has the potential to grant tribes food sovereignty, thereby affording tribal governments greater independence in managing agricultural practices, food distribution, and the allocation of government resources to address food insecurity among tribal populations. It should be noted that the possession of sovereignty and autonomy over land does not guarantee the attainment of food security for indigenous groups. It is imperative for both state and federal governments to collaborate with tribal entities, with a primary emphasis on the economic, technological, and educational aspects that contribute to the enhancement of food security. In South America, namely in countries such as Brazil and Chile, there exist several instances where indigenous tribes, despite their ownership of vast tracts of land, continue to experience food insecurity as a result of the aforementioned circumstances.



[Hunger Free Oklahoma](#) (2023) underscores the importance of implementing initiatives that promote the utilization of federal assistance programs among both food insecure rural and urban communities. Additionally, it advocates for a comprehensive reform of the existing assistance programs and the expansion of endeavors aimed at delivering essential services and resources to food insecure communities, irrespective of their geographical location. These measures are deemed crucial in mitigating the issue of hunger in Oklahoma. The recommendations proposed by Jernigan et al. (2017) encompass a range of measures aimed at addressing food insecurity and promoting equitable access to nutritious food within tribal communities. These actions include the implementation of tribal policies that facilitate the expansion of food assistance programs, the promotion of projects that enhance access to healthy food options, and the support of community-based efforts to ensure food security in both rural and urban settings.





## Considerations (contd.)

Moreover, these actions aim to alleviate the disproportionate impact of diet-related disparities on low-income individuals and racial or ethnic minority populations. The authors further propose that stakeholders from tribal, federal, and state levels, alongside businesses and nonprofit organizations, should engage in collaborative efforts to tackle the issue of food insecurity and its root causes. These efforts should encompass enhancing the food environments within tribal communities, diminishing obstacles to accessing nutritious foods, and augmenting income levels to ensure a sustainable standard of living. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recently published a report that sheds light on the phenomenon of "social invisibility" that is presently being faced by indigenous populations. The argument posits that the absence of data regarding these people can be attributed to their social invisibility, which in turn leads to a dearth of policy and program requirements.

The efforts undertaken by food banks and organizations like Hunger Free Oklahoma and the [Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma](#) do really contribute to the mitigation of poverty and food insecurity. Nevertheless, there is an immediate need for long-term solutions in the United States, necessitating the involvement of relevant agencies in such projects. According to contemporary studies, the optimal pathways to pursue appear to involve bolstering the economy, enhancing employment prospects, increasing salary levels, improving transportation options, and fortifying familial structures. The implementation of economic initiatives in rural areas necessitates the inclusion of local communities and should be oriented toward achieving long-term objectives that transcend the short-term concerns of transient governing bodies.

In contemporary academic environments characterized by an increasing prevalence of ideological orientations, we propose the ongoing investigation of hunger and poverty eradication through a scientific lens. One prominent concern evident in several current initiatives aimed at addressing hunger and poverty is their foundation in ideological and political frameworks that frequently diverge from scientific methodologies. For instance, while community organization has been found to have beneficial effects on communities across various dimensions, empirical research highlights that the primary variables contributing to the alleviation of hunger and poverty are predominantly economic in nature. Therefore, prioritizing the development of robust economic strategies for low-income households and rural communities is crucial in addressing the issues of hunger and poverty. The current state of affairs necessitates the establishment of collaborative efforts across many entities, including organizations, enterprises, communities, and governmental bodies at the local, state, and federal levels. Efforts aimed at mitigating hunger should prioritize the identification and targeting of key elements that contribute to its alleviation.



# Considerations (contd.)

It is important to acknowledge that not all Native individuals residing in Oklahoma experience poverty. While a portion of this population possesses considerable wealth, many of them fall within the middle-class tier. It is imperative that philanthropic and governmental initiatives persist in directing their attention toward Native populations and indigenous locations that exhibit the most pronounced economic requirements.



## IRB Revision

On July 26, 2023, the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Oklahoma concluded that obtaining IRB permission was not required for the development of this report.





## References

- Bardenhagen, C., Pinard, C., Pirog, R., & Yaroch, A. (2017). Characterizing rural food access in remote areas. *Journal of Community Health*, 42(5), 1008–1019. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1007/s10900-017-0348-1>
- Blue Bird Jernigan, V., Wetherill, M. S., Hearod, J., Jacob, T., Salvatore, A. L., Cannady, T., Grammar, M., Standridge, J., Fox, J., Spiegel, J., Wiley, A., Noonan, C., & Buchwald, D. (2017). Food insecurity and chronic diseases among american indians in rural oklahoma: The THRIVE study. *American Journal of Public Health* (1971), 107(3), 441-446. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303605>
- Connolly, M. (2018, September 19). “Improving the lives of indigenous people.” OECD. [https://www.oecd.org/iaos2018/programme/IAOS-OECD2018\\_Connolly.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/iaos2018/programme/IAOS-OECD2018_Connolly.pdf)
- Feeding America (2021). The impact of the coronavirus on food insecurity in 2020 & 2021. [https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief\\_3.9.2021\\_0.pdf](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/National%20Projections%20Brief_3.9.2021_0.pdf)
- Jernigan, V.B.B et. al., (2017). “Food insecurity and chronic diseases among American Indians in rural Oklahoma.” <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303605>
- Jernigan, V. B. B., Huyser, K. R., Valdes, J., & Simonds, V. W. (2017). Food Insecurity among American Indians and Alaska Natives: A National Profile using the Current Population Survey-Food Security Supplement. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 12(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2016.1227750>
- Hipp, J. S., Duren, C. D., & Parler, E. (2018). Building Indian country's future through food, agriculture, infrastructure, and economic development in the 2018 farm bill. *Journal of Food Law & Policy*, 14(1), 24.
- Hunger Free Oklahoma. (2023). “Together, we can work to end hunger.” HFO. <https://www.hungerfreeok.org/>
- Kaufman, P., Dicken, C. Williams, R. (2014). “Measuring Access to Healthful, Affordable Food in American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Areas.” USDA. [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43905/49690\\_eib131\\_errata.pdf?v%20=%2042103](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/43905/49690_eib131_errata.pdf?v%20=%2042103)



# References

Maillacheruvu, S. (2022). The Historical Determinants of Food Insecurity in Native Communities. CBPP. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-historical-determinants-of-food-insecurity-in-native-communities>

Nam, Y., Huang, J., Heflin, C., & Sherraden, M. (2015). Racial and ethnic disparities in food insufficiency: Evidence from a statewide probability sample. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 6(2), 201-228. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681574>

NCAI Partnership for Tribal Governance (2020). Tribal Governance Innovation Spotlight (Food Sovereignty): Osage Nation. Washington, DC: National Congress of American Indians. <https://www.ncai.org/ptg/Osage.Nation.Case.Study.pdf>

Oyarzo, F., Asher, T., Harrison, C., DuBose E., & Smith, S. (2023) OECD countries' main contributors to families emerging above the poverty line. [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of Psychology and Sociology, Rogers State University.

USDA. (2021). USDA Invests \$3.5 Million to Provide Food Purchasing Options to Tribal Communities. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/fns-0010.21>

USDA (2022). "Food insufficiency rates in 2022 were higher among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander households, black households, and American Indian and Alaska native households compared to other racial and ethnic groups." USDA ERS - Chart Detail. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=100417>





For more information, contact:

**The Poverty, Family & Trauma Research Center**

[foyarzo@rsu.edu](mailto:foyarzo@rsu.edu)

We would love to work with you!

We offer internship positions, research opportunities, and the possibility to connect with national and international organizations.

Our researchers have years of experience in the American and international research systems and a passion for exploring the factors that help our communities alleviate poverty, strengthen families and clinically treat trauma.

If you would like the opportunity to partner, support or publish with us, please contact me.

