

# Michigan Poverty & Well Being Map: East Central Region

The East Central region includes: Arenac, Bay, Clare, Gladwin, Gratiot, Isabella, Midland, and Saginaw counties. Learn more about the map at [poverty.umich.edu](http://poverty.umich.edu).

## East Central Michigan Sees High Rates of Food Insecurity, Despite High Rates of Food Assistance

Despite having the second highest utilization rates of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the state (15.1%), East Central Michigan residents are experiencing alarming rates of food insecurity. Based on 2021 data from Feeding America, every county in the region except Midland has food insecurity rates above the state average of 11.7%. The issue is most pronounced in Clare County, which has the state’s highest rate of food insecurity at 18.3%, and 18.64% of residents use SNAP, which is also referred to as food stamps or EBT cards.<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity likely persists despite high SNAP utilization because East Central Michigan has the highest poverty rate in the state—16.49%—with Saginaw and Clare having poverty rates of 20.7% and 18.9% respectively. Additionally, Saginaw, Clare, and Isabella counties have very high proportions of people experiencing deep poverty,<sup>2</sup> which is defined as having incomes that are less than 50% of the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> Experiencing deep poverty makes it extremely difficult to afford and access food even with SNAP benefits.



It’s also likely that poor households aren’t the only ones grappling with food insecurity. Half of the counties in the East Central Region have a higher proportion than the rest of the state of Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed (ALICE) households that are above the poverty line but still struggling to afford the basic cost of living.<sup>4</sup> For instance, 36% of households in Clare County were below the ALICE threshold which is significantly higher than the state rate of 26%.<sup>5</sup> Since ALICE households usually do not qualify for SNAP but may still struggle to afford adequate food, this could be contributing to the high rates of food insecurity in

	State	Region
<b>Population</b>	10,062,512	556,618
<b>Median Income</b>	\$63,202	\$52,810
<b>Below Poverty Level (&lt;18)</b>	17.6%	22.6%
<b>Below Poverty Level</b>	13.0%	16.5%
<b>ALICE</b>	25.9%	25.7%
<b>ALICE + Poverty Rate</b>	39.0%	42.2%
<b>Receiving Food Stamps/SNAP</b>	12.6%	15.1%
<b>Housing Cost Burdened</b>	31.3%	29.7%
<b>Without Health Insurance</b>	7.1%	7.3%
<b>Single Parent Households</b>	25.2%	25.7%

the region. In 2021, Feeding America estimated that 12% of food-insecure people in Clare County are above the income eligibility for SNAP.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, a community needs assessment conducted by the BWell Saginaw Partner Coalition identified food access as a top problem for Saginaw County. Forty-four percent of respondents indicated that they worry about running out of food and expressed concerns about a lack of healthy food options as well as transportation to reach grocery stores.<sup>7</sup> This is not surprising since the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Access Atlas classifies many areas in Saginaw County as food deserts, which are areas where at least 33% of the population cannot readily access a large grocery store.<sup>8</sup>

Another factor driving food insecurity despite high SNAP enrollment is the failure of SNAP to cover the cost of an average meal. An Urban Institute study on the gap between SNAP benefits and average meal costs found significant gaps in Clare and Gladwin counties.<sup>9</sup> In Clare County from January to September 2022, the average meal cost was \$2.90, while the SNAP benefit per meal was \$2.42; this leaves SNAP recipients in Clare County with a gap of 25%. In Gladwin County, it was 28% for the same time period. SNAP benefit amounts are based on the Thrifty Food Plan (TRP), which research finds falls short of an accurate measure for the cost of a healthy meal. Part of the issue is that the TRP fails to account for factors such as the costs of a variety of healthy meals and the time it takes to prepare them. The gap persisted even when SNAP benefits were temporarily raised during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Food insecurity, driven by high rates of families who are either below the poverty line or between the poverty line and below the ALICE threshold, will continue to persist in the region without larger systemic changes. Beyond raising the level of SNAP benefits, addressing the food deserts in the region and helping hungry families who do not qualify for SNAP benefits will be necessary to improve food security in the region. An example of these efforts is the recent collaboration between the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan and the Saginaw Just Transition Indaba to provide mobile food distributions and increase safe food storage. Efforts to make affordable and adequate food accessible to struggling households can benefit both those whose SNAP benefits aren't sufficient and ALICE households who do not qualify for SNAP.

## References

- 1 Feeding America. "Food Insecurity among Overall (all ages) Population in Michigan." [2021]. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/michigan>
- 2 Social Explorer. "American Community Survey (ACS) 2017--2021 (5-Year Estimates)"
- 3 In 2021, the poverty line was drawn at \$21,960 for a family of 3.
- 4 ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These households fall above the poverty line but still struggle to afford the basic costs of living.
- 5 Combined with the poverty rate of 19%, this means that 55% of households are struggling financially.
- 6 Feeding America. "Food Insecurity among Overall (all ages) Population in Michigan." [2021]. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2021/overall/michigan>
- 7 The BWell Saginaw Partner Coalition and the Saginaw County Health Department. "2023-2026 Community Health Assessment Report, Saginaw County, Michigan." [2023]. <https://saginawpublichealth.org/media/zgsdvm32/2023-2026-saginaw-co-cha-report.pdf>
- 8 U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. "Food Access Research Atlas." [July 2023]. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas/>
- 9 "[Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County?](#)" Urban Institute, July 13, 2023.
- 10 Goetz, Dylan. "[\\$2 million in federal funding secured to alleviate mid-Michigan food insecurities.](#)" *MLive*, March 20, 2023.