A PRIMER · ASHEVILLE, NC

Why the Hunger Numbers Are *Two Years Old*

The county food-insecurity figures for the Asheville area arrive about two years after the year they describe. The newest were released in July 2026. They describe 2024, a year Hurricane Helene didn't hit until late September. We're measuring a post-disaster hunger crisis with numbers that barely reach the disaster. The federal food-security survey behind them was not collected for 2025, the first full year after the storm.

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THE PROBLEM

When a report says that some percentage of Buncombe County is food insecure, the number sounds up to date. But the newest county-level hunger estimate describes 2024. Helene put more than six feet of water through the region's food bank on September 27 of that year. So most of the year the estimate describes came before the storm. The figure is real, though it measures a region the flood has since remade.

This isn't a flaw anyone is hiding. It's how the data is built, and the lag is roughly two years. Knowing that should change how you read every hunger statistic, especially here. To learn what the basic terms mean, start with How to Think About Food Insecurity.

The official hunger numbers are a rear-view mirror. Here, the mirror shows only the first few months after the storm.

THE LAG

How *old* the numbers really are

Good data takes time to collect, turn into usable estimates, and release. By the time it reaches you, the year it describes is long over.

Two sources produce most hunger statistics. The federal government's annual food-security report, from the USDA, covers the nation and the states. Its edition for 2024 came out in December 2025, about a year after the year it measures. In that edition, the state figures are averages of three years, 2022 through 2024. The county numbers, the ones for Buncombe or Madison, come from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap. It uses a statistical model to turn federal survey data into local estimates, and it runs further behind.

The Map the Meal Gap edition released in May 2025 carries 2023 data. The edition with 2024 data came out on July 28, 2026. So from the storm until that release, the most current county hunger figure for this region described a year that ended before Helene arrived. Since then, the local number you can look up describes 2024.

2024
the year the newest available county hunger data describes
MAP THE MEAL GAP 2026

Sept 2024
when Helene hit, late in the year that data covers
HELENE STRUCK WNC, SEPT 27

July 2026
when the first county data for 2024 came out
FEEDING AMERICA

THE BLIND SPOT

The *recovery* fell into the gap

Helene hit late in the year the newest data covers.

The county estimates for 2024 describe the whole year, and only the months from late September to December came after the storm. The federal food-security survey behind these estimates was not collected for 2025, so the first full year of recovery falls into a blind spot.

That's why the official statistics have lagged behind what people in the region are living through. Meanwhile MANNA FoodBank says need is the highest it has seen in more than four decades of serving the region. By its own count, pantry visits now run more than 220,000 a month on average, up from the more than 170,000 it reported in September 2025. Pantry visits and a modeled rate measure different things. MANNA's count covers its whole region of 16 counties and the Qualla Boundary, not Buncombe alone. Still, the newest Buncombe County rate rose too, from 14.9 percent in 2023 to 16.8 percent in 2024.

THE YARDSTICK

And the *measure itself* has stopped

A lag means the numbers come late. The federal report has stopped coming.

The USDA report that anchors all of this has been discontinued. The government announced in September 2025 that the report's edition for 2024 was the last one planned. So the national benchmark that the county models lean on might not be updated again. When a measure ends, its last figure stays the newest one.

The USDA also cut the funding for the survey behind the report. That survey had asked roughly 40,000 households the same food-security questions every year since 1995. The round due in December 2025 was never collected. The measurement itself was switched off, so there's no raw data waiting to be written up for the missing years. A later administration couldn't simply start publishing again. Feeding America says it plans to change its method and add other data sources to keep producing local estimates.

HOW TO READ IT

Read the stat *for the year it describes*

None of this means the numbers are useless, only that you have to read them with the date in mind.

Three habits help. First, check the year a figure describes, not just the year it was published. A 2025 report can carry 2023 data. Second, in a year with a major shock like Helene, don't read the official rate as a current snapshot. Third, when you want to know what's happening now, watch a signal that updates far more quickly: pantry visits. They're rougher than a modeled rate, but they're not two years stale.

For Western North Carolina in particular, the data has barely begun to show the storm. Anyone who says hunger in the region has stabilized is reading a chart that stops in 2024.

THE POINT

The chart stops where the *story keeps going*.

Hunger statistics are careful, useful, and late. The newest county figure for this region describes 2024, and there is no official national or state food-security figure for 2025. For now, the official figures and the pantry counts describe two different years.

The figure on the page is where the measurement stopped. The need kept moving after that, and in this region it moved fast.

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