

Statistics regarding child hunger in Georgia are overwhelming. For those who want to help but don't know where to start, the first step is understanding the invisible strain facing families in our own communities.

Stephen Patrick, MD has tracked these trends as a medical doctor and chair of the [Department of Health Policy and Management at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health](#). As a Christian who connects his work directly to the message of Matthew 25, Patrick analyzes the daily consequences of food policy on human lives.

Child hunger remains pervasive in our state. Consequently, Patrick advises that a powerful response focuses on direct action in local school districts, policy advocacy, and community support.

Understanding Child Hunger in Georgia and Rural Insecurity

Patrick's recent research shows the sheer scope of nutritional gaps in Georgia. [His statewide survey of 1,002 parents](#) documents that one in three Georgia families with children experience low or very low food security.

"This is a solvable problem," Patrick shared with ECF. "No child should go to bed hungry."

This strain is unevenly distributed across the state. Data shows that 43% of rural families report low or very low food security, compared to 31% in urban and suburban counties.

More than 25% of parents cut or skipped meals in the past year because they lacked enough money for food. When children lack nutrition, it causes immediate school performance issues and inattention in class, alongside long-term physical and mental growth challenges.

How Public Policy Can Lead to Child Hunger in Georgia

Furthermore, shifting state and federal policy creates practical hurdles to feeding children that local communities must clear, Patrick said:

- **School Lunch Debt:** While free school meals were available during the pandemic, that policy sunset. Georgia has not passed universal free meal laws, leaving 6% of students with school lunch debt. A quarter of these families owe \$100 or more.
- **SNAP Access:** About one in four families receive food assistance through SNAP, but 52% of those households lost access at some point in the past year because of administrative disruptions.
- **Systemic Reductions:** Ongoing federal shifts mean the removal of work requirement exemptions for households with older children, the loss of SNAP eligibility for specific immigrant groups, and the total elimination of SNAP-Ed funding.
- **Household Budget Trade-offs:** To purchase food, 62% of families cut back on clothing, 53% reduced transportation spending, and 51% delayed paying utility bills.

Local Action: How Churches Respond to Child Hunger in Georgia

Meaningful action starts with local awareness. Patrick noted that faith communities can achieve results by looking at the needs of families within their own congregations and what assistance may be needed in their school districts.

Parishes can eliminate lunch debt by organizing targeted collections to pay off outstanding balances directly with local school administrators. Given that 86% of Georgia parents support free breakfast and lunch for public school students, congregations could back changes to regional and state policy that alleviate child hunger. Policy changes are critical to systemic relief.

Creative Solutions for Rural Communities

[Parishes can adapt creative solutions](#), like distributing food in backpacks on Fridays during the school year or delivering meals to families during summer breaks. Patrick suggests coordinating with established food pantries to bolster supply lines.

In doing so, parishes would [fulfill Jesus' words from Matthew 25:35](#): "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat."

"There is a lot we can do, the first step is deciding we need to do it," Patrick said. "When we feed those who are hungry, we are feeding Him."



Michelle Hiskey (she/her) is an experienced writer and journalist whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post and AJC, and earned four Pulitzer Prize nominations. She ghostwrote two business books related to negotiation strategies, and coaches writers including Emory faculty. Michelle is a member at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church.

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