

Nielsen Helps to Map the Meal Gap through Pro Bono



Nielsen teamed up with Feeding America to provide data for the Map the Meal Gap report—a landmark study that arms food banks with information to advocate for funding and public awareness about hunger.

Bob, a Vietnam veteran and a former electrical engineer in Southern Nevada, has been struggling financially and emotionally ever since he lost his job two years ago. While many at age 65 would be looking to retire, Bob wants to keep contributing and allow his three children to continue looking up to him like they always have.

“It’s emotionally devastating to be idle,” he says.

Bob, like many other residents in his state, is also having trouble putting food on his table and can’t afford basic groceries. Thankfully, Three Square Food Bank, a Feeding America member food bank in Las Vegas, offers a critical lifeline to hundreds of other families, veterans and seniors like him.

Across the country, food banks like Three Square are helping to feed the 49 million Americans and nearly 18 million households who are “food insecure,” according to Feeding America’s 2014 [Map the Meal Gap](#) report. Food insecurity describes people who are unable to afford enough food for a healthy, adequate diet. Almost a third—16 million of them—are children.

Map the Meal Gap—a report that calculates food insecurity rates for families and children in every county in the country—is a landmark study that arms food banks like Three Square with data to advocate for federal nutrition programs, donor funding and more public awareness about hunger.



“Map the Meal Gap is our way of better understanding hunger in our community to help us make more informed local decisions,” said Brian Burton, President and CEO of Three Square.

And it wouldn’t have been possible without Nielsen. In 2010, Nielsen teamed up with Feeding America to undertake a massive pro bono project to provide food pricing information and to calculate the cost of meals at the local level.

“Food insecurity is the closest metric we have to measure hunger,” said Emily Engelhard, Director of Social Policy, Research and Analysis at Feeding America. “Now for the fourth year, we’ve been able to

show how much a meal costs in every county in the country and the food budget shortfall of food insecure people—the difference between what healthy groceries cost and the resources needed to pay for them.”



This is hugely important in the fight to end hunger in America, and for us to tell the national story: The recession hasn’t ended for the working poor.
–Feeding America

“This is hugely important in the fight to end hunger in America, and for us to be able to tell the national story,” said Engelhard.

Before the Map the Meal Gap Report was first published in 2011, food insecurity data was only available at the national and state levels from the USDA. Feeding America often looked at poverty as an estimate for measuring need, but that did not illustrate the full picture of families in need. They found that more than half of those whom the USDA considered food insecure were actually above the poverty line, and almost 60% of those in poverty were food secure.

Volunteering Skills and Talent to Help End Hunger

“Our first task was to simply get to know Feeding America in order to learn their language and create a scope of work,” said Mitch Kriss, SVP of Advanced Solutions and the lead Nielsen volunteer on this skills-based volunteer project. “We did a lot of helpful storytelling in the beginning. It was only after several weeks that we understood the challenge was to take federal and state level information about food and translate that for every county. The problem was that there was no data available at that



level of granularity, so we created a methodology for food CPI (consumer price index) at the local level.”

Working with Craig Gundersen, an economist who studies food insecurity at the University of Illinois, and the research team at Feeding America, Kriss and the Advanced Solutions Group at Nielsen used the Thrifty Food Plan—a USDA food plan that identifies types and amounts of foods to provide adequate nutrition—as a guide. Over the course of three months, Kriss and his team mapped over one million UPC codes to each part of the Thrifty Food Plan, converted calculations from volume to pounds, and produced prices for the Thrifty Food Plan for every state and county—the foundation for the meal cost component of the Map the Meal Gap report.

The impact of this skills-based volunteer project is wide-ranging. Beyond having an impact on more than 200 food banks across the country, Nielsen’s pro bono work improved employees’ skills and

engagement, and helped the company cement its brand as a corporate citizen.

“It felt good to help on such a meaningful project,” said Kriss. “It was so important from a social impact



It felt good to help on such an important project. It was so important from a social impact perspective, we worked extra hours to make it happen. —*Mitch Kriss, Nielsen*

perspective, that we worked extra hours to make it happen. I also learned a great deal about the analytical methods that are used to estimate food insecurity at a local level.”

Designing Employee Volunteer Programs for Success

The catalyst for Nielsen’s employee engagement and volunteer program--Nielsen Cares-- started in 2010 with the desire to formalize and scale the pro bono and volunteer work many Nielsen associates were already doing. Today, more than 20,000 associates participate in “hands on” and skills-based volunteer activities throughout the year, including during the company’s annual Global Day of Service in June.



In choosing impact areas, Nielsen focused on what the company knows most about, and where it could harness its deep roots in data, insights and analysis to have the greatest impact. Associates from around the world specializing in areas such as marketing, communications, research and data analytics volunteer their time and expertise with nonprofit organizations around the world such as Special Olympics, World Food Programme, TechSoup Global and Junior Achievement to advance the global issues of hunger and nutrition, diversity and inclusion, education and technology access.

“We wanted to make sure that we could cast a wide enough net to be a positive force in our communities, while leveraging what’s unique about us at Nielsen,” said Julia Wilson, Corporate Social Responsibility Manager for Nielsen Cares. “We strived to use our understanding of consumer behavior, and in this case, our expertise in food pricing, consumption and distribution to help end hunger and improve nourishment globally.”

Success Factors

What has made Nielsen’s volunteer program a success? Wilson credits the company’s **motivated employees** who go out and meet community and nonprofit needs wherever they can. A second factor has been the **range of different skill sets** and areas of expertise she can connect to a volunteer opportunity. “From methodology, to surveying, to consumer insights and data analytics—there’s no shortage of opportunities to take Nielsen capabilities and use them for social good,” said Wilson.

A third success factor has been the **support of Nielsen’s senior executives**. They have been champions for skills-based volunteering and are continuously pushing themselves and their teams to find new opportunities to make an impact.

Finally, Nielsen’s **approach to evaluation** allows them to measure what matters. “First and foremost, we want to ensure that our pro bono program is impactful for communities. From there, we want to make sure that our associates have positive experiences, and that they are given the opportunity to grow and develop their skills, to bring additional meaning to their work at Nielsen, and that they feel more connected to their colleagues and their communities as a result,” said Wilson. As a company, we’re extremely lucky. We know that associates who engage in skills-based volunteering bring that same passion and expertise to their work at Nielsen every day.”

Nielsen is a Billon + Change pledge company and a Corporate Service Council member. To learn more about Nielsen’s Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, visit:

www.nielsen.com/sitelets/yir/responsibility.htm