

# LANCASTER COUNTY COMMUNITY HUNGER MAPPING: *IDENTIFYING LOCALIZED FOOD ACCESS GAPS AND INCREASING UNDERSTANDING OF INTERSECTING ISSUES FOR THE CHARITABLE FOOD SYSTEM*



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## INTRODUCTION

Nearly 50,000 people in Lancaster County face food insecurity, meaning that a staggering one in eleven Lancasterians experiences limited or uncertain access to adequate food. But the impact of food insecurity is not consistent through the county and across all of its communities; it varies significantly across race, age, and place. The analysis in this report represents the charitable food system's first major research initiative to better understand the causes, experiences, and dispersion of food insecurity in the county.

This report includes the voices of neighbors who currently face food insecurity, gathered through research methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The perspectives of charitable food providers serving these neighbors are included as well, and this primary data is used in combination with publicly available data from entities such as the U.S. Census Bureau and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Thanks to this mixed-methods approach, this report can paint an accurate and vibrant picture of food insecurity and the charitable food system's response to it in Lancaster County.

Food insecurity is an unacceptable problem anywhere, but it is especially intolerable in a community as abundant as Lancaster. To that end, this report also aims to create an actionable guide to both making meaningful changes within the charitable food system to improve the experiences of the neighbors who experience food insecurity in the

immediate future and working towards the elimination of hunger in Lancaster County in the long term.

An issue of this magnitude cannot be solved by one organization alone; it will take the entire Lancaster County community's collective effort to change the food security landscape. Therefore, recommendations made in this report will be implemented by community organizations and stakeholders working together. The work will be led by Hunger-Free Lancaster County (HFLC), an open collaborative organization designed to bring interested parties together to address food insecurity in Lancaster County with support from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank (CPF), the Feeding America food bank serving central Pennsylvania.

HFLC will also collaborate with charitable food providers and other anti-poverty agencies as well as additional stakeholders, such as school districts, elected officials, and more, across Lancaster County. In this work, the community will aim to build on the past accomplishments of the charitable food network but also to make further meaningful progress toward ensuring that everyone in Lancaster County has access to enough nutritious food to lead healthy lives and no one ever has to worry about how they will get their next meal.



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*“These people here, they serve you with love and so we get not only the food, but all of that from them too.”*

*- Lancaster City  
Focus Group Participant*

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**The main areas that this analysis aims to address are as follows:**

1. What is the extent of food insecurity in Lancaster County, and where in the county is it concentrated?
2. Who in Lancaster County is most impacted by food insecurity? How do food insecurity rates and the main drivers of food insecurity differ by age, race and ethnicity, or other factors?
3. How accessible is charitable and retail food in Lancaster County and how does access vary in different areas of the county? How does access vary, if at all, by demographics?
4. What barriers do neighbors face in accessing charitable food services? Where do food distribution gaps exist in Lancaster County? What is the neighbor experience at food pantries like?
5. What are utilization rates of key government nutrition-related assistance programs and how do they vary across the county? What is the charitable food system’s role in this space?
6. What other issues impact food insecurity in Lancaster County? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?



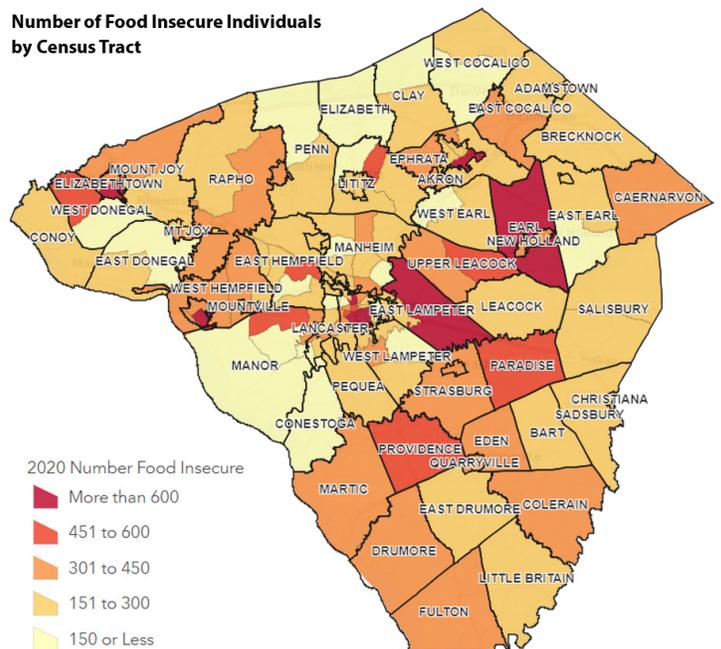


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the food insecurity situation in Lancaster County, identifies the largest charitable food access gaps, discusses utilization of government programs, and identifies the main drivers of food insecurity in Lancaster County. While report recommendations maintain a focus on the unique role of the charitable food system in Lancaster County to ensure everyone in Lancaster County has access to sufficient food to lead a healthy, productive life, this report’s findings are relevant to policymakers and stakeholders in other sectors concerned with the issue of food insecurity, and all Lancasterians.

The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank’s Policy Research team, in collaboration with the Lancaster County Consultative Group, Hunger-Free Lancaster County, and pantries countywide, implemented a series of data collection and listening strategies to inform the recommendations of this report and center the voices of neighbors across Lancaster County, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups among food pantry visitors and surveys and listening sessions among food pantry coordinators, as well as in-depth and innovative quantitative data analyses.

**Number of Food Insecure Individuals by Census Tract**



There are several overarching themes in the main findings and corresponding recommendations of this report that can provide a path forward to addressing food insecurity in Lancaster County.



To view interactive versions of the maps contained within this report, please click [here](#) or scan the QR code at left.

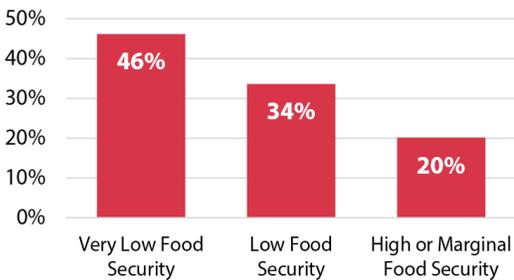
**Main Finding 1: Nearly 50% of households that visit food pantries in Lancaster County experience very low food security (VLFS), an experience characterized by reduced food intake.**

VLFS is especially acute among households with children and among adults living alone, while seniors are less likely to face very low food security compared to other household types. Areas of high food insecurity are concentrated along the Route 30, 222, and 283 corridors, as well as in the City of Lancaster.

**Main Finding 2: Food pantries are among the lowest barrier social service providers. However, significant food pantry access hurdles remain in Lancaster County.**

These include geographic access barriers; limited hours of operation, especially on weekends and evenings; pantry service territories in suburban and rural areas; documentation and income requirements; strict visit frequency limitations; and the treatment and experiences of pantry visitors.

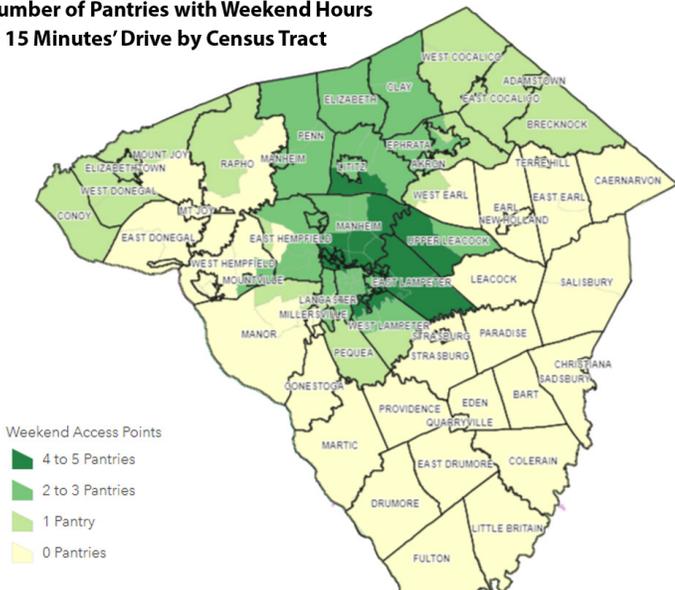
**Household Food Security Status for Food Pantry Visitors**



**Recommendation: No one in Lancaster County should go hungry. The charitable food system and other policymakers and stakeholders should use the reduction of very low food security as a main measure of success and institute policies and programs that make progress towards this goal.**

This includes reducing a variety of barriers to accessing the charitable food system, encouraging participation in available government supports like SNAP, investing in solutions to systemic upstream issues identified in this report, and advocating for sustained investments in crucial anti-hunger policies, such as the expanded child tax credit and universal school meals.

**Number of Pantries with Weekend Hours in 15 Minutes' Drive by Census Tract**



- Southern, southeastern, and northwestern Lancaster County have limited geographic access to charitable food, while other areas, such as Mount Joy, have restricted access due to service territories.
- One in three food insecure Lancasterians does not have access to a weekend distribution, and one in four lacks access to an evening distribution.
- Spanish-speaking neighbors visit most pantries in the county, but only one-third have reliably available Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers.
- Each interaction a neighbor has with a pantry worker matters; much of the reported stigma experienced in pantries stems from negative interactions with staff or volunteers.
- Food pantries have inconsistent policies for serving households who have incomes above 185% of the federal poverty line, which is the current income limit for government-funded food.
- Two-thirds of pantries require a photo ID and 52% require proof of residency. These requirements go beyond the self-declaration of need form required at pantries using government-funded food.
- Pantries in Lancaster City report lower storage capacity than other parts of the county and are also less likely to utilize client choice distribution models.

**Recommendation: Pantries should work to lower access barriers as much as possible, and Hunger-Free Lancaster County should help coordinate efforts to reduce access barriers across the network.** Not every pantry can or should be everything for every person. With collaboration across the county and investments in serving historically marginalized communities, the charitable food system can work to ensure that every Lancasterian has access to pantries that suit their needs and circumstances.

**Main Finding 3: There are many opportunities for increased collaboration among food pantries in Lancaster County and a clear role for Hunger-Free Lancaster County in supporting both coordination of efforts and resource development.** Pantries appreciated the opportunity to meet with and learn from one another in regional listening sessions and they expressed a desire to meet again in the future.

**Recommendation: Hunger-Free Lancaster County should develop resources to support pantry operations,** such as sourcing guides, materials to assist pantries in determining neighbor food preferences, and informational sheets to enable and encourage referrals across pantries or to other services in Lancaster County. In addition, HFLC should facilitate regional and countywide gatherings of food pantries to discuss challenges, opportunities, and progress towards shared goals.



**Main Finding 4: Government-funded nutrition assistance programs like SNAP are many times the size of the charitable food system but are underutilized. Pantries are trusted community assets and can leverage this trust to promote participation in these key government programs.** Just 50% of food pantry visitors participate in SNAP, including just 47% of people who experience very low food security, although at least 85% of food pantry visitors are likely eligible. Only 35% of eligible food pantry visitors participate in WIC. School lunch, school breakfast, and summer feeding programs are also underutilized. Neighbors report that government programs are difficult to navigate, and people who visit pantries overall trust food pantries to help them more than they trust government programs.

**Recommendation: With their trusted status, pantries have a unique opportunity to promote participation in SNAP, WIC, and other government programs.**

Promotion efforts could include talking openly and regularly about the programs in a positive light, having clear and visible information available, and assisting with applications for higher capacity pantries. HFLC could help develop appropriate materials and strategies to coordinate and support these efforts. In addition, HFLC could partner with local retailers to make the utilization of SNAP more accessible, both through recent innovations around potential food delivery and Double-Up Food Bucks programs. Furthermore, HFLC could help coordinate school-focused advocacy efforts to increase participation in school meals, such as the adoption of alternative breakfast models, as well as support federal and state-level advocacy around universal school meals. HFLC could further coordinate federal and state-level advocacy to increase accessibility of WIC and to promote SNAP.

**Just 50%** of pantry visitors participate in SNAP, while at least 85% are likely eligible.

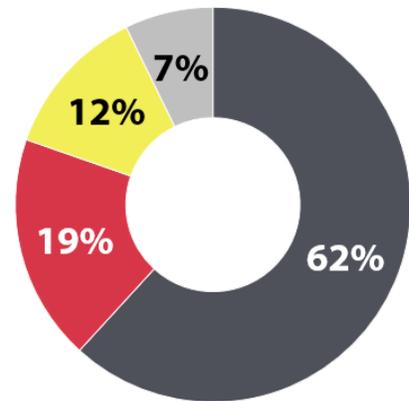
**Main Finding 5: The main upstream and intersecting issues impacting food insecure individuals who visit food pantries in Lancaster County are systemic problems such as historic marginalization, housing insecurity, financial exclusion, and low and irregular pay.**

- More than a quarter of food pantry visitors have been forced to move in the last year (11%), are worried about being forced to move (22%) in the next year, or both.
- Nearly a third of households are either unbanked (19%) with no access to a checking or savings account or underbanked (12%) and use costly alternative financial services.
- Most people who visit a food pantry (over 70%) either work full-time, are on Social Security, or receive Disability/SSI. Of the 35% of households who work full-time, nearly half report earning less than \$24,000 a year while 16% earn less than \$12,000 a year.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system, with HFLC coordination, should work to address these systemic issues through strategic partnerships and investments in underserved communities.**

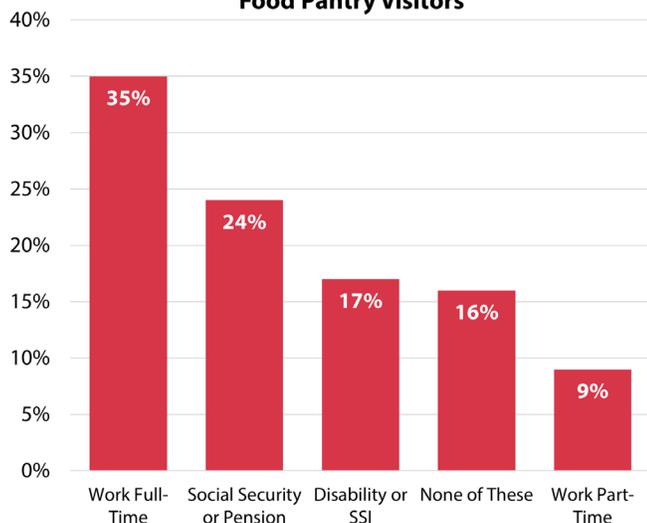
Opportunities could include eviction prevention interventions, collaboration with local financial institutions to increase availability of financial products that work for low-income households, partnerships with the VITA program to utilize “bankable moments,” and education and advocacy around issues of disability and low wage work.

**Banking Access for Pantry Visitors**



- Fully Banked
- Unbanked
- Underbanked
- Don't Know/Prefer not to answer

**Main Source of Household Income among Food Pantry Visitors**



## METHODS

### OVERVIEW

This final report represents the culmination of a multi-faceted approach to data collection and analysis, with an emphasis on listening to Lancasterians who visit food pantries and gaining an understanding of their experiences. The report combines both quantitative and qualitative methods and support its recommendations. Contributions included in this report are deidentified to maintain the privacy of participants. Each method of data collection is described in turn below.

### SECONDARY ANALYSIS

In the first phase of the project, the secondary analysis utilized data from a variety of different sources including the American Community Survey 2016-2020 5-year data, 2020 Census Data, USDA retailer and food desert data, SNAP participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, WIC participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, United Way ALICE 2023 data, child congregate meal program site and participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and USDA, and Feeding America Map the Meal Gap 2022 data with 2020 food insecurity estimates. A detailed explanation of the SNAP priority outreach methodology, ArcGIS network analyses, and methodology used to identify target schools for child nutrition outreach is provided in the technical appendix.

### NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

In October 2022 and January and February 2023, CPFEB researchers conducted surveys at 12 geographically and demographically representative food pantries across Lancaster County. Food pantry visitors could take the survey at the pantry on a CPFEB-provided device, have the survey read to them by a CPFEB researcher, or scan a QR code on a postcard that enabled them to complete the survey on their own device at their convenience. Neighbors could call 211 to complete the survey by phone. Surveys were available in English and Spanish and were designed to take 10 minutes on average. \$10 gift cards were provided to each participant. Survey results were cleaned for duplicate entries. The desired sample size to achieve a 90% confidence interval and 10% margin of error was achieved and exceeded at 11 pantries.

### NEIGHBOR INTERVIEWS

Interview subjects were randomly selected from a pool of individuals who participated in pantry visitor surveys. All individuals surveyed were given the option to provide a phone number for follow-up contact in the form of a 15- to 20-minute phone or Zoom interview in English or Spanish. CPFEB researchers developed a flexible interview guide and conducted all 13 interviews. The interviews asked about visiting a food pantry from the perspective of pantry users. The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed pantry visitors to speak about the most relevant or pressing matters related to their own experiences.

### NEIGHBOR FOCUS GROUPS

Four in-person focus groups were held across Lancaster County with 34 participants. Three additional participants were interviewed individually following a scheduled virtual focus group they were unable to attend. Focus groups brought neighbors together to discuss their use of the pantry, gain additional perspective on the needs of pantry visitors, and represent their concerns and ideas about the role of pantries in their communities. PR Works, Inc. was contracted by CPFEB to recruit, facilitate, and record the meetings, and collaborated with the Policy Research team to develop the discussion guide. All participants were compensated for their participation.

### NON-FOOD PANTRY NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at non-food pantry locations to determine why some individuals who may be food insecure do not currently utilize a food pantry. The non-food pantry survey results reflect responses from 21 total participants at two agencies. The surveys were anonymous and comprised of four questions, including two food security-screening questions used in healthcare settings. Individuals were asked if they attend a food pantry; those who responded 'No' or 'I used to' were asked to explain their answers, both from a list of potential options and a free response blank.

## PARTNER SURVEYS

The CPFEB Policy Research team distributed pantry surveys to CPFEB agency partners who operate pantries that do not limit participation by age or status across Lancaster County. The surveys asked questions regarding distribution type and frequency, operating hours, policies for food pantry visitors, other services offered, and pantry capacity. In total, surveys were distributed to 39 partners, with 37 responding, for a 95% response rate.

## PARTNER LISTENING SESSIONS

Food pantries that are CPFEB agency partners were invited to attend listening sessions in February and March 2023 to discuss strengths and challenges at the pantry level. The round-table discussion style allowed for partners to identify and learn from each other's experiences and perspectives as pantry leaders within the community. Discussion topics include pantry and community strengths, sourcing and logistics, challenges related to distribution, and opportunities for advocacy. The CPFEB research team held four total listening across geographically central areas to make it easier for all partners to attend.

## PARTNER DATA SHARING AND SERVICE INSIGHTS

To develop the census tract level food pantry access gap map, this report utilized data from Service Insights on MealConnect, an electronic neighbor intake tool developed by Feeding America, from the seven participating pantries in Lancaster County. In addition, another 11 large pantries with independent electronic tracking systems shared anonymized census tract level data to help generate the total pantry visits by census tract map. Altogether, 18 of the 39 CPFEB partner food pantries in Lancaster County are included in the data. These 18 partners are among the largest pantries in the county and comprise a sizable majority of the 21 food pantries who report collecting electronic data. Additional information about the methodology used in the gap analysis is in the technical appendix.

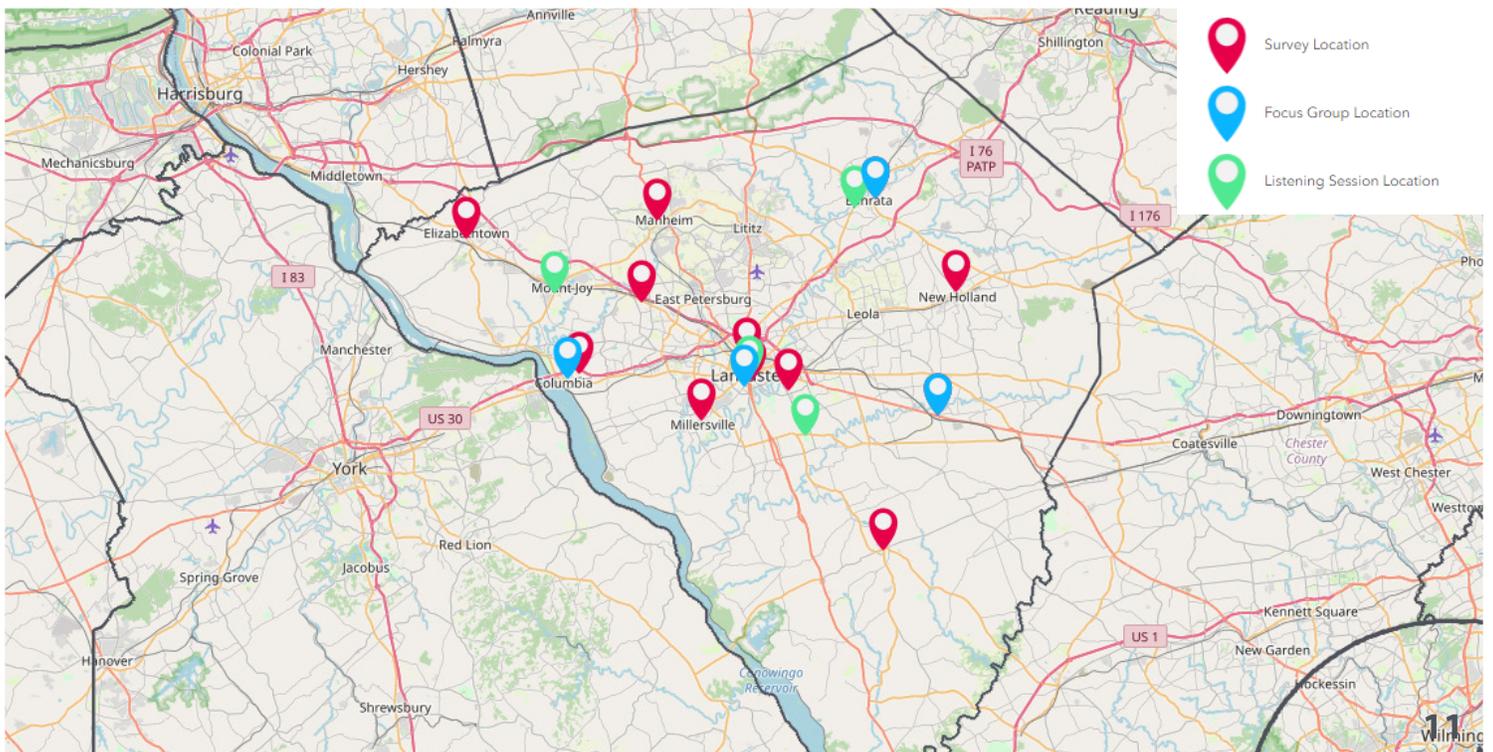
 **740 Neighbor Surveys**  
at 12 pantry locations

 **34 Neighbor Focus Group Participants**  
at 4 locations across the county

 **29 Partner Listening Session Participants**  
at 4 locations across the county

 **37 Partner Surveys**

 **13 Neighbor Interviews**





## SECTION I: FOOD INSECURITY ANALYSIS

### DEFINITION OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food security requires, at a minimum, the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways. Food insecurity, on the other hand, is defined by lack of access or uncertainty of access to adequate food needed for an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup>

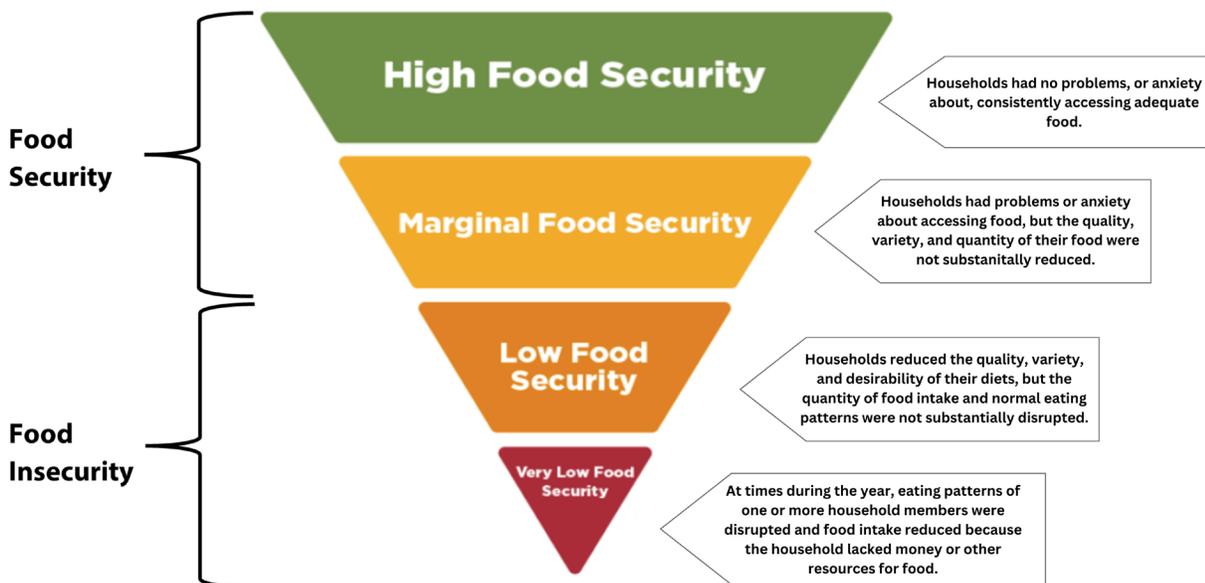
Food security, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is divided into four distinct categories: High Food Security, Marginal Food Security, Low Food Security, and Very Low Food Security (VLFS). These four categories are shown in the figure below.<sup>2</sup>

Food insecurity is made up of the latter two subcategories, low food security and very low food security. Low food security is defined by uncertain access to food and reduced quality and desirability of attained foods, while very low food security is defined by reduced food intake. Very low food security is the closest measurable approximation to hunger, although it does not specifically measure hunger, as hunger is the physical sensation of discomfort or weakness from lack of food in combination with the need to eat. Both overall and very low food security will be discussed throughout the report.

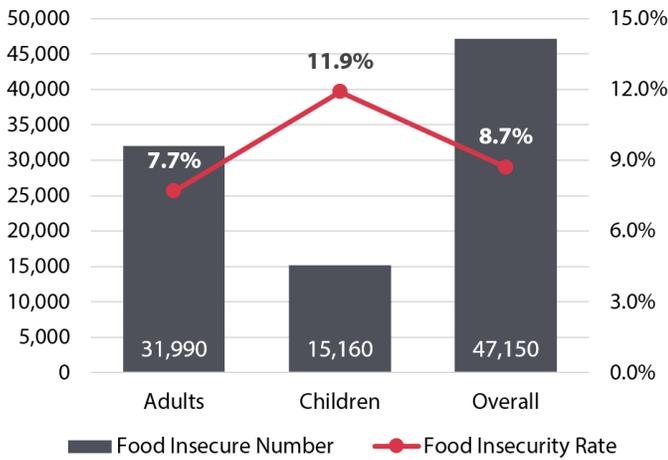
The charitable food system has the greatest potential to impact very low food security because it aims to prevent people from reducing the quantity of food intake. The charitable food system can also impact low food security by providing healthy and desirable foods. Traditional food banking and food pantry work cannot reduce the economic insecurity that causes worry about food access and corresponding low food security. Therefore, the charitable food system in Lancaster County should focus first and foremost on reducing very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity.

This report talks about both very low food security, referring to the individual experience of not having enough to eat and High Food Insecurity areas, which refers to areas of the county where food insecurity (both very low and low food security) is experienced at greater rates than other areas. These terms are not interchangeable, but rather one refers to an individual experience of reduced food intake and one refers to the collective amount of food insecurity in a certain area being higher than in other areas.

### Levels of Food Insecurity



## Food Insecurity by Age Group



## FOOD INSECURITY IN LANCASTER COUNTY

**Lancaster County faces a food insecurity rate of 8.7%, meaning that more than 47,000 Lancastrians are food insecure.**

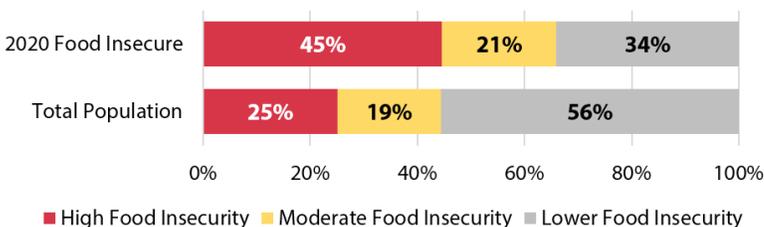
This overall food insecurity rate masks significant disparities in food insecurity rates across age, race, and place.

- Children are 55% more likely to be food insecure than adults in Lancaster County. Nearly 1 in 8 children, 11.9%, are food insecure – a total of 15,160 children in Lancaster County compared to 7.7% of adults. Children make up one-third of all food insecure individuals in the County but are less than one-quarter of the total county population.
- In addition, food insecurity is three and a half times more prevalent among Hispanic and Black individuals, at 21%, compared to 6% for white, non-Hispanic individuals in Lancaster County.

## SUB-COUNTY FOOD INSECURITY RATES

In addition to disparities in food insecurity rates by age and race/ethnicity, disparities also exist spatially, across and between census tract and ZIP Code boundaries. Whenever possible, this report provides analysis at the census tract level rather than the ZIP Code level. Census tracts are preferable because they largely align with municipality borders in rural and suburban areas and often represent neighborhoods within municipalities in cities. In addition, census tracts are relatively consistent in population which makes comparisons between places more useful, especially compared to ZIP Codes, which have wildly divergent populations. An analysis of food insecurity at the ZIP Code level is available in the Lancaster County Hunger Mapping interim report, completed in January 2023.<sup>3</sup>

## Food Insecure Number and Total Population by Food Insecurity Typology



## FOOD INSECURITY RATES BY CENSUS TRACT

The map on the following page shows food insecurity rates by census tract in Lancaster County in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Lancaster County census tracts were divided into three different typologies around the county food insecurity rate of 8.7%.

Census tracts with a food insecurity rate of 9% or above, which is above the county-wide average were classified as High Food Insecurity, census tracts with a food insecurity rate of 7% and 8% were classified as Moderate Food Insecurity, while census tracts with food insecurity rates at or below 6% were classified as Lower Food Insecurity.

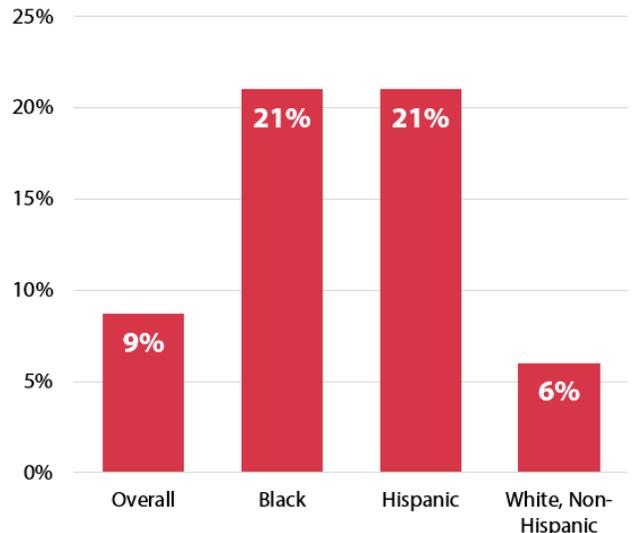
High and Moderate areas make up roughly half of all census tracts in Lancaster County and Lower Food Insecurity areas make up the other half.

**High Food Insecurity census tracts are largely concentrated in Lancaster City and along the Route 30, 222, and 283 corridors.** Outside these corridors, there are High Food Insecurity tracts in Upper Leacock, Earl, Elizabethtown, Warwick, and Colerain Townships. Moderate food insecurity areas are again concentrated in the southern portion of Lancaster County.

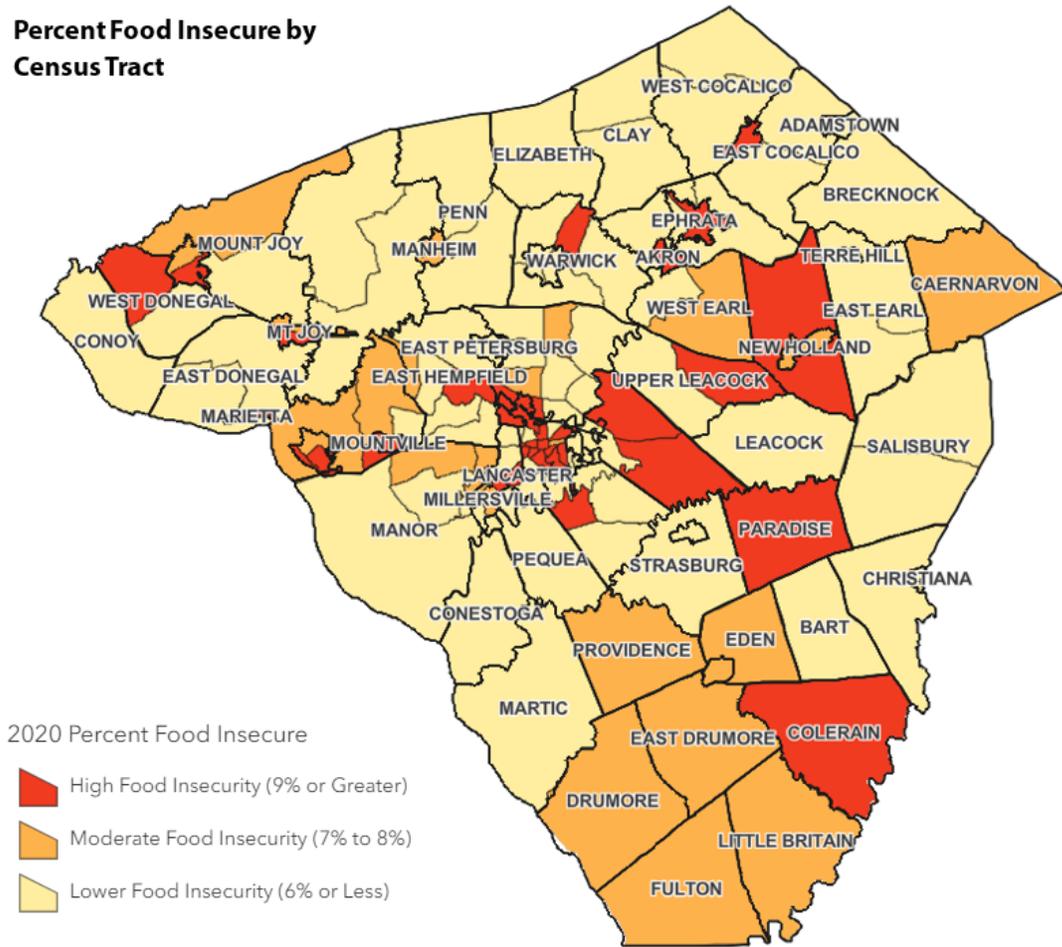
The map of total number of food insecure individuals, shown on the following page, is largely in line with the map showing the highest percent food insecure due to relatively consistent populations across census tracts. These results show the importance of targeting mitigating efforts on Lancaster City, East Lampeter, Columbia, Upper Leacock, Earl, Ephrata, and Elizabethtown. In addition, the Southern End of the county and West Hempfield areas have a concentration of food insecure individuals.

**The 32 High Food Insecurity census tracts have just 25% of Lancaster County's population, but 45% of the total number of food insecure individuals.** This demonstrates the importance of focusing on these major areas. These typologies provide useful insight into the concentration of food insecurity across Lancaster County, but it remains critical to continue to invest in low food insecurity areas, as they still contain more than one-third of all food insecure people in Lancaster County.

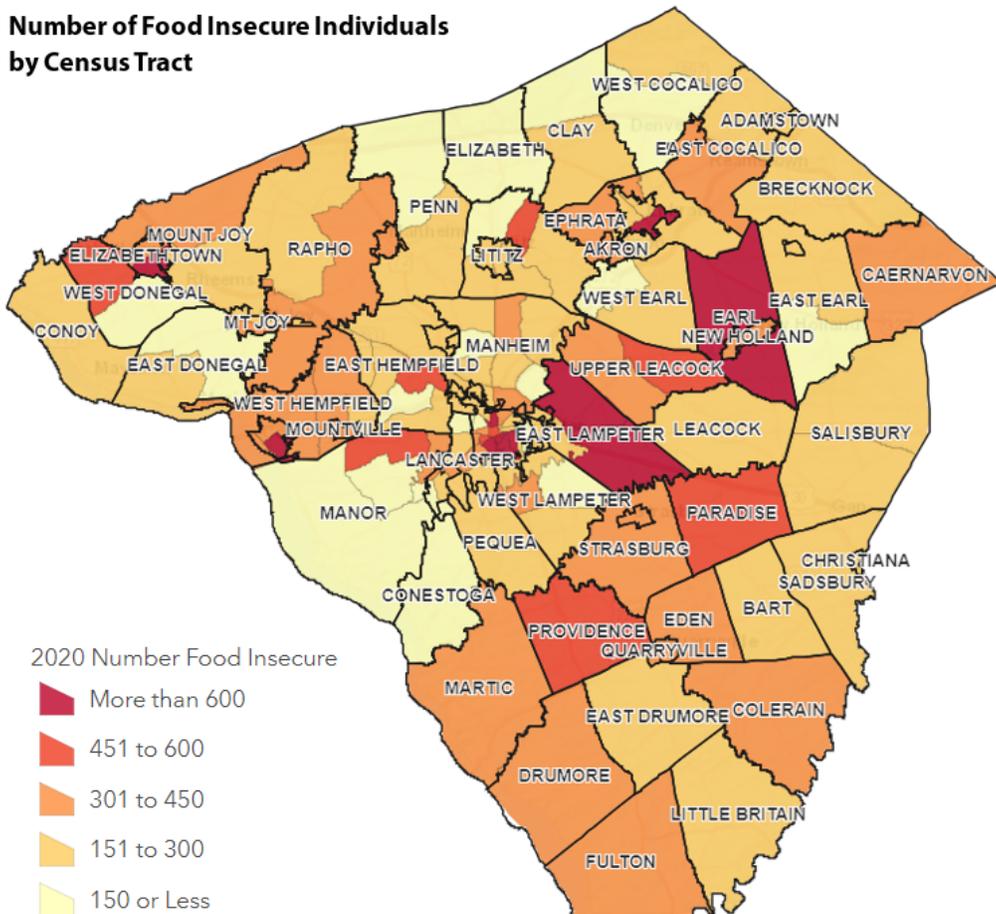
## Food Insecurity Rate by Race/Ethnicity



**Percent Food Insecure by  
Census Tract**



**Number of Food Insecure Individuals  
by Census Tract**

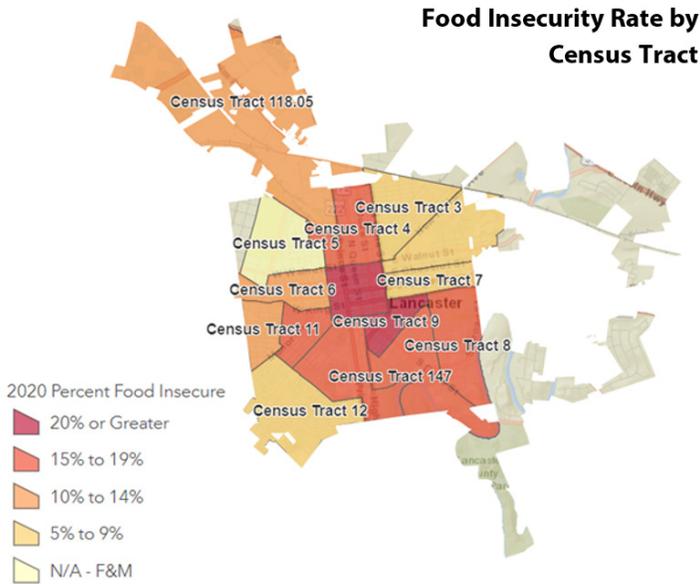


## FOOD INSECURITY RATES BY CENSUS TRACT IN THE CITY OF LANCASTER

In Lancaster City, 11 of 14 census tracts are classified as High or Moderate Food Insecurity areas. There is no food insecurity data for Census Tract 5 due to the presence of Franklin and Marshall College; Feeding America does not produce estimates for census tracts in which large institutions such as universities or prisons may distort the underlying data.

Census Tract 9 in southeast Lancaster has the highest food insecurity rate, at 25%.<sup>5</sup> This is followed by Census Tract 1 in downtown at 20%.

Nearly all the neighborhoods with the highest food insecurity rates were either majority or plurality Hispanic. This demonstrates that inequities by race and ethnicity in Lancaster City extend to large disparities in food insecurity rates by geography as well. Further, in Lancaster County overall, of the 50 census tracts that are 90% or more white, two-thirds of them are Lower Food Insecurity areas. Meanwhile, all of the five majority Hispanic census tracts are High Food Insecurity areas.



## FOOD INSECURITY IN LANCASTER IN A REGIONAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

**Zooming out, Lancaster County has a slightly lower food insecurity rate than most of its neighboring counties and a lower rate than the state of Pennsylvania as a whole.<sup>6</sup>**

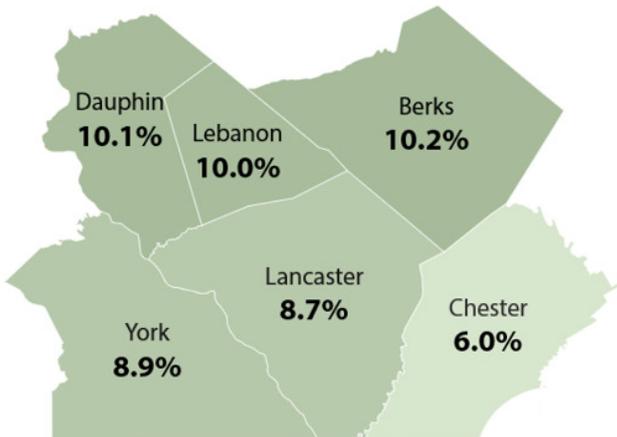
- Lancaster has a significantly lower food insecurity rate than Lebanon, Dauphin, and Berks counties, a similar rate compared to York County, and a much higher food insecurity rate than Chester County.
- Lancaster County's child food insecurity rates are significantly higher than its overall rates but are not as severe as those of Dauphin and Berks counties.

**USDA annual reports provide breakdowns on the prevalence of food insecurity by household type at the national level.**

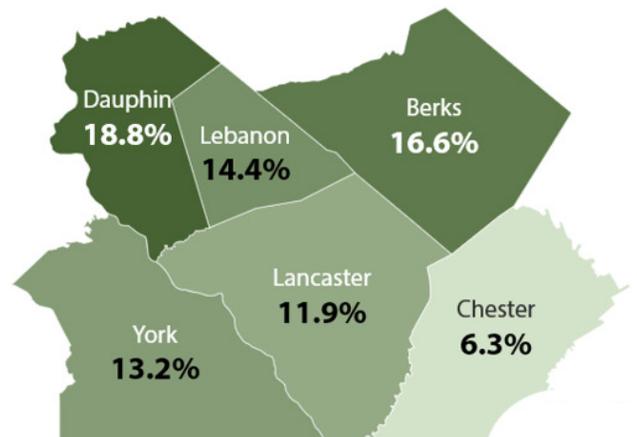
- Food insecurity and very low food security rates are highest for single female-headed households with children at 24.3% and 8.0%, respectively.
- Single male-headed households with children had lower, but still elevated, with food insecurity and very low food security rates of 16.2% and 4.4%, respectively.
- Households with children under 6 years old had a food insecurity rate higher than households with children overall, at 12.9% compared to 12.5% for households with children ages 6 to 17.
- Married-couple families with children had a food insecurity rate of 7.4%.

**11 of 14** census tracts in Lancaster City are classified as High or Moderate Food Insecurity areas.

### 2020 Food Insecurity Rates

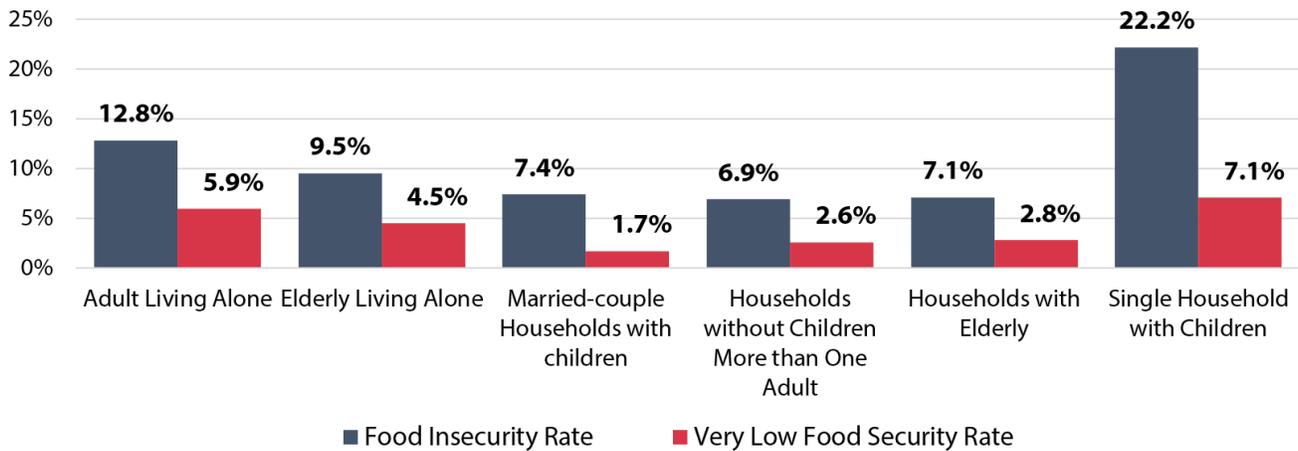


### 2020 Child Food Insecurity Rates



2020 Food Insecurity Rate 5.0% 20.0%

## Food Insecurity Rate by Household Type



**Households without children are much less likely to be food insecure. This is largely driven by lower rates among households without children and more than one adult.**

Households with elderly members have among the lowest food insecurity rates of any household type examined by the USDA, at 7.1%. Elderly people living alone have higher rates, at 9.5%.

**Children are the most likely to experience food insecurity of any age group but are the least likely to experience Very Low Food Security within food insecure households. This is because adults often go without food first in an attempt to shield their children from hunger.**

Among households with children, adults are typically the most likely to go hungry, as adults let children eat first. This is reflected in the USDA data, which shows that very low food security rates among children is 0.7% in households with children compared to 3.6% for adults in households with children.

This national data is reflected in the experiences of families in Lancaster County as well. One neighbor who visited a food pantry in New Holland said, "I feed my kids their dinner first. Some nights, I get up in the middle of the night and heat up a can of green beans because I'm so hungry and there's nothing else in that cupboard." Unfortunately, this experience is not unique among food pantry visitors as 50% of households with children and 55% of single households with children experience reduced food intake and very low food security.

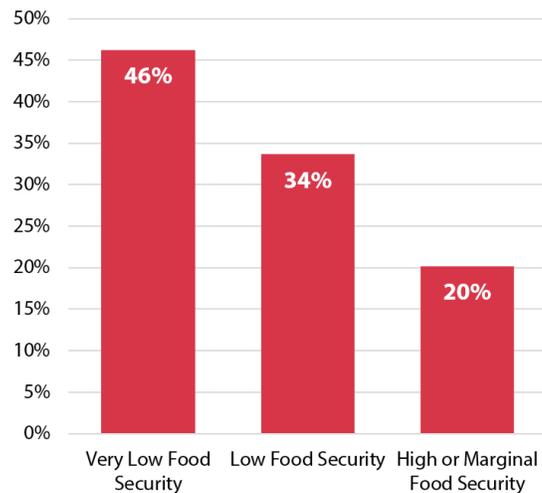
## THE EXTENT OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG FOOD PANTRY VISITORS IN LANCASTER COUNTY

Food pantry visitors are much more likely to be food insecure than the general population, as neighbors turn to charitable food to meet basic needs. Because a main goal of the charitable food network is to ensure that no one goes hungry, the extent and depth of food insecurity, especially very low food security, is an important measure for the charitable food system.

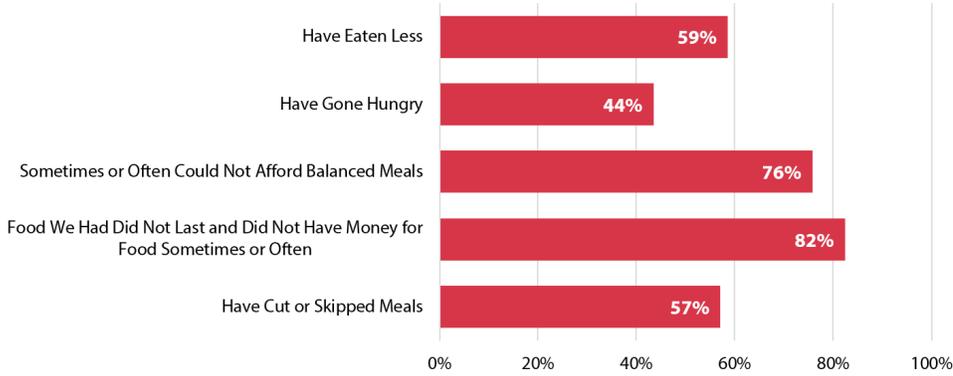
To measure food insecurity, this study utilized a six-question food security module from the USDA. This accurately measures very low food security and low food security, depending on the number of questions answered affirmatively. The six questions include questions on the adequacy of the amount of food, the variety of food, and the frequency with which people went hungry because there was not enough money for food.

**Overall, nearly half (46%) of all food pantry visitors experienced very low food security, meaning that they cut back on food quantity and regularly did not eat enough food.** The median value for very low food security across the 11 food pantry survey sites was 44%, increasing confidence in the survey estimates. An additional 34% of pantry visitors experienced low food security, meaning that 80% of all food pantry visitors are food insecure.

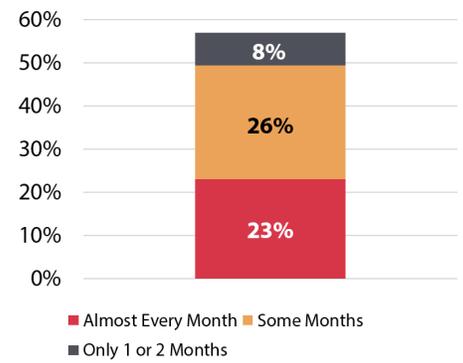
## Household Food Security Status among Food Pantry Visitors



### Percent Responding Affirmatively to Food Security Questions



### Frequency of Cut or Skipped Meals Due to Running out of Money for Food



Answers for the underlying food security questions are shown in the figure above. A total of 59% of food pantry visitors said they have eaten less because there wasn't enough money for food and 44% said they have gone hungry because there was not enough money for food. More than three-quarters of survey respondents reported that they sometimes or often could not afford balanced meals and 82% said the food they had did not last and they did not have money to get more "sometimes" or "often."

In addition, 57% of food pantry visitors reported cutting or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food, with nearly a quarter (23%) reporting that they cut or skip meals almost every month. Another quarter (26%) cut or skip meals some months but not every month. This two-question subset of the Food Security Module most closely approximates very low food security, as 100% of all households who experience very low food security answered that they cut or skip meals, and 95% of all very low food security households reported that they cut or skip meals almost every month or some months. This makes this question an excellent proxy for measuring very low food security.

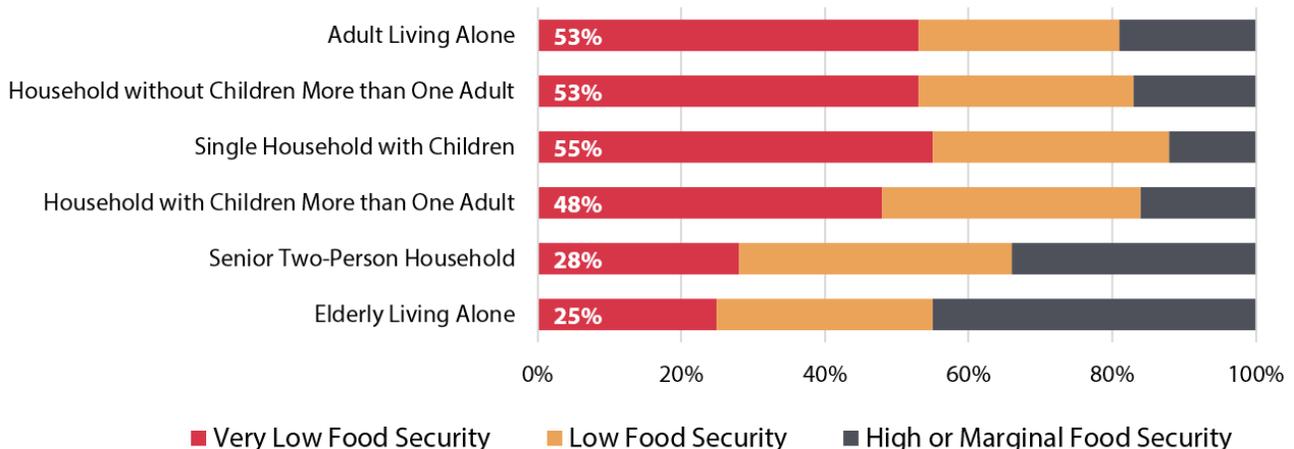
Very low food security rates varied dramatically by household type among survey respondents. The main differentiator was that senior-only households' responses indicated that they are the least likely to face very low food security among all household types represented. This aligns well with national USDA data that shows senior households are less likely to be food insecure than single households with children or adults living alone. This is especially true of elderly households with more than one household member.

Among the pantry visitor population, senior households have a very low food security rate of around 25% compared to around 50% for all other households. However, even a 25% very low food security rate represents a large number of seniors who report going hungry.

As discussed above, non-senior households experience very low food security more frequently than do seniors. This notable divergence is likely the result of low, but consistent incomes among senior households receiving Social Security and the fact that there are many other types of assistance targeted toward low-income seniors. Seniors are more likely to earn more than \$1,000 a month than all other households, as just 27% of seniors earn less than \$1,000 compared to 36% of non-senior households. Nearly 50% of senior households report earning between \$1,000 to \$2,000 per month compared to 26% of non-senior households. Since income is the main determinant of food security status and households earning under \$1,000 per month are the most likely to experience very low food security, this low but consistent income appears to help seniors not go hungry as consistently as other household types. There are also additional food programs targeted towards seniors, such as CSFP and Meals on Wheels, that may help keep their very low food security rate lower compared to other households.

There were only slight differences in very low food security rates by race/ethnicity. This does not mean that white households are just as likely to experience very low food security at a similar rate to Black and Hispanic households overall in Lancaster County. The data just shows that among households who visit food pantries in Lancaster County, households are similarly likely to experience very low food security regardless of race/ethnicity.

### Food Security Status by Household Type



## FOOD INSECURITY OVER TIME: THE IMPACT OF THE EXPANDED CHILD TAX CREDIT

Prior to 2021, food insecurity rates in Lancaster County stayed relatively constant, although the consistency belied significant structural changes in the causes of food insecurity each year. In 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government responded with a massive economic stimulus, including increased unemployment compensation benefits, increased SNAP benefits, and one-time stimulus checks that had a major impact on household income and poverty.<sup>7</sup>

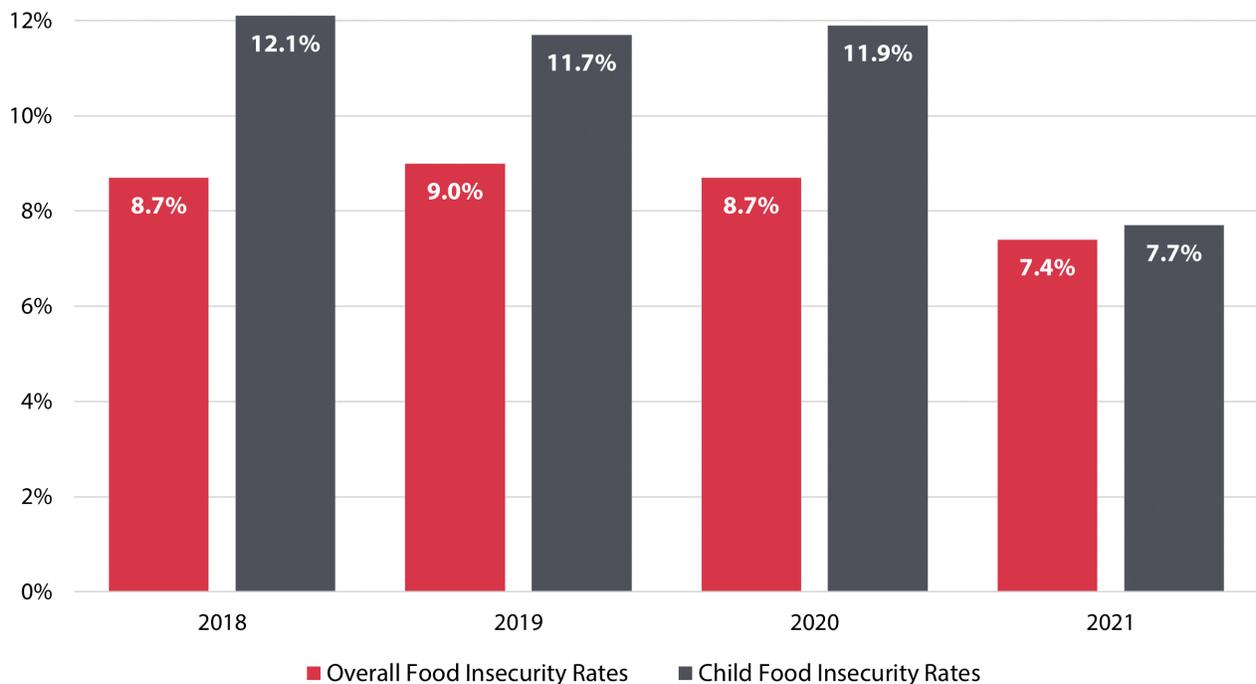
A concerning feature of food insecurity in Lancaster County is the stagnation in food insecurity rates pre-pandemic, even at the peak of one of longest economic expansions in modern history.<sup>8</sup> This stasis was similarly reflected in state-level and surrounding county data, indicating that economic expansion and low unemployment alone will not solve food insecurity. Nationally, food insecurity rates have not dropped below 10% in the last 25 years, even during economic peaks and expansions.

In 2021, food insecurity dropped by 15% in Lancaster County, with child food insecurity rates driving the decrease. Child food insecurity rates dropped 35% in just one year from 2020 to 2021. After a long period of stasis, this dramatic drop in food insecurity rates was driven by the historic anti-poverty investment of the expanded child tax credit that provided \$250 a month for children ages 6 to 17 and \$300 a month for children under 5 years old. This major investment in children paid off and drove the largest decrease in poverty and food insecurity for children in the last 25 years, which is the furthest back food insecurity data is available.<sup>9,10</sup>

Unfortunately, the expanded child tax credit expired at the end of 2021. The current child tax credit is just \$2,000, is provided on an annual basis, and excludes the lowest income households, reducing its current impact on food insecurity. The expanded child tax credit in 2021 showed that a major investment in children can very quickly reduced lived food insecurity among children and push overall food insecurity below its previous floor, something that economic growth and low unemployment have not been able to do alone.



### Food Insecurity in Lancaster County Over Time



# FOOD INSECURITY ANALYSIS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 1 Finding 1: Nearly 50% of food pantry visitor households experience very low food insecurity, including 23% who skip meals every month.**

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should utilize the reduction of very low food security as its main measure of success and implement policies and programs to lower very low food security over time.**

Very low food security is an important metric of success for the charitable food system. The charitable food system, including HFLC and food pantries, should work to collaboratively institute policies that aim to reduce very low food security among pantry visitors.

Policy changes could include reducing stringency of service territories in certain areas, allowing people to come more frequently as capacity allows, and allowing people to visit more than one pantry in a month. Food pantries could post information about other nearby food pantries at their sites to inform people that it is okay to seek help when and where they need it.

Going forward, the charitable food system can measure progress towards reducing hunger among food pantry visitors with a one to two question survey that asks about the frequency of cut or skipped meals, as these questions most closely approximate very low food security. One of the charitable food system's overarching goals could be to reduce the number of people who cut or skip meals almost every month or some months because they do not have money for food.

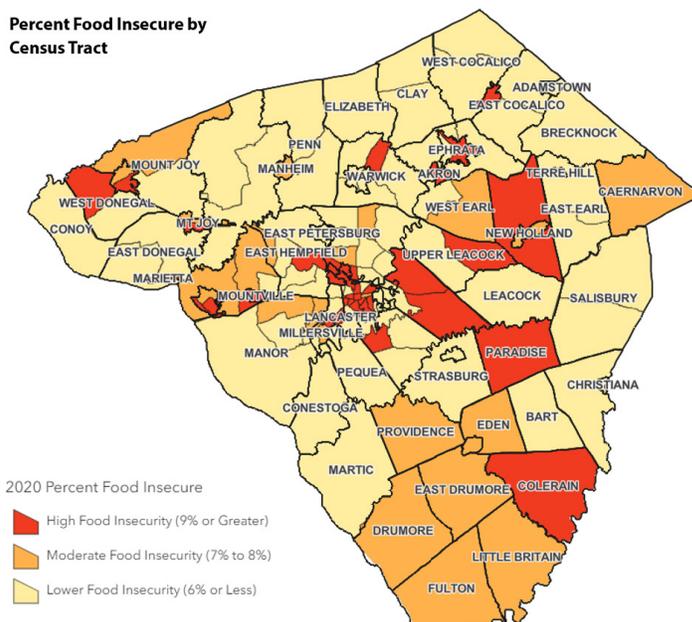
**Section 1 Finding 2: Children are 55% more likely to be food insecure than adults, with a food insecurity rate of 11.9% compared to 7.7%.**

Nearly one in eight children in Lancaster County is food insecure. Households with children are more likely to be food insecure than other households, and in families with children, adults are the most likely to go without food.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system and other stakeholders should support and expand programs targeted towards children and their families.**

The charitable food system can support and expand programs targeted specifically at children and their families, including federally funded meal programs and child and family grocery programs. Programs should target the whole family when possible because parents in food insecure households choose to reduce their own food intake first to protect their children.

**Percent Food Insecure by Census Tract**



# FOOD INSECURITY ANALYSIS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 1 Finding 3: Very low food security is lowest among senior-only households, with just one quarter of senior-only households facing very low food security compared to half of all other households.**

This is likely due to more consistent, albeit low, incomes among seniors as well as existing programs targeted towards seniors, such as senior centers and CSFP. Households who earn less than \$1,000 a month are the most likely to be food insecure, and seniors are more likely to earn more than \$1,000 a month.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system and other stakeholders should continue targeted senior programs as they are working to reduce very low food security, but also utilize resources to assist other populations in similar, targeted ways.**

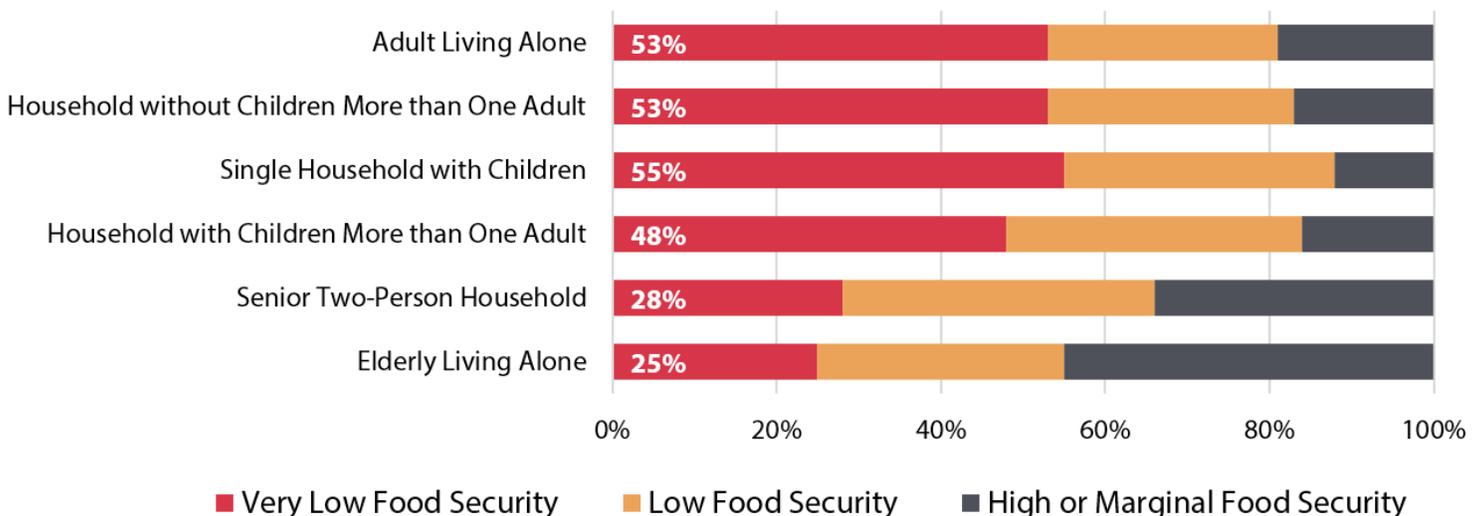
The charitable food system should continue to promote programs designed for seniors but also ensure resources are targeted for other populations, especially since non-senior households are the most likely to face very low food insecurity.

**Section 1 Finding 4: The expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC) reduced food insecurity dramatically in 2021, especially among children. Lancaster County’s kids were 35% less likely to be food insecure in 2021 than in 2020.** However, the expanded CTC expired in January 2022, and the 2023 food insecurity situation has regressed to levels similar to 2020.

**Recommendation: Well-targeted and accessible broad-based programs like the expanded Child Tax Credit have the largest impact on food insecurity. Policy advocacy should focus on this program and other similar programs.**

Low-barrier, broad-based programs like the expanded CTC may have the greatest impact on food insecurity. The charitable food system should advocate for this policy and similar policies that promote agency and dignity, in addition to designing and implementing programs and policies that share the principle of promoting dignity, choice, and autonomy. For example, this may include providing gift cards rather than purchasing foods at retail prices.

**Food Security Status by Household Type**





## SECTION II: ACCESS TO CHARITABLE FOOD IN LANCASTER COUNTY

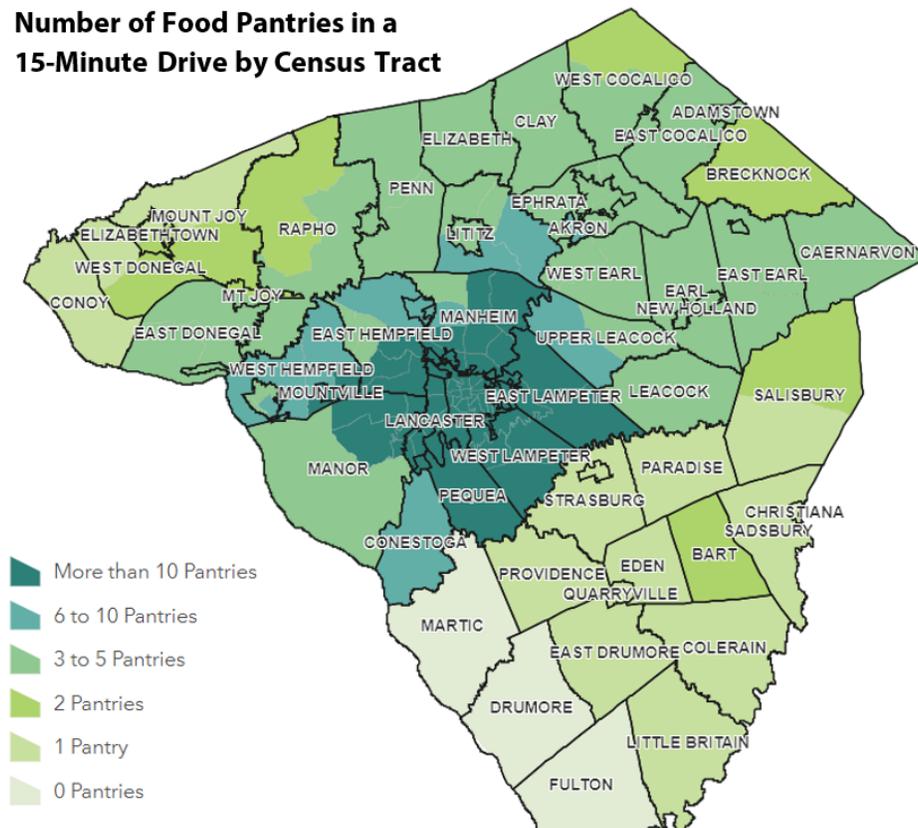
### GEOGRAPHIC ACCESS TO CHARITABLE FOOD

To understand pantry access at a sub-county level, this analysis examines the number of CPFB partner food pantries within a 15-minute drive of each census tract center of population in Lancaster County. The analysis includes only food pantries that are open to everyone regardless of age or status. Therefore, youth programs, MilitaryShares, and senior programs are not included.

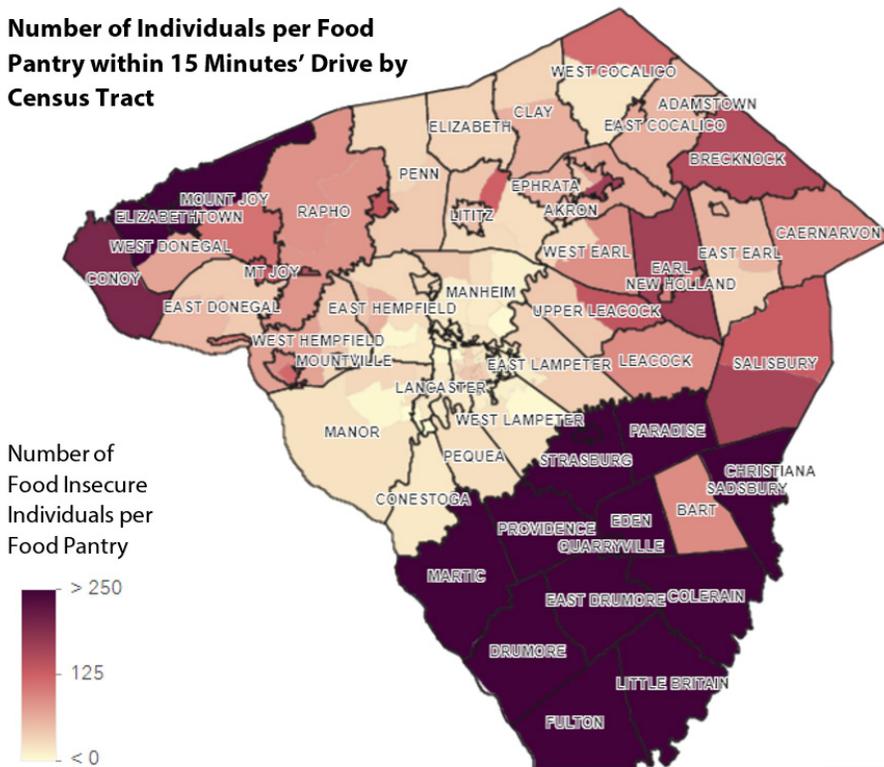
The map below shows that people living in the areas in and around Lancaster City have the most access to pantries in the charitable food network by drive time. The northeastern section of the county has some access to pantries; northwestern and southern Lancaster County have the least access to food pantries within a 15-minute drive, as indicated by the lighter areas of the map.

*Charitable food access is a multidimensional issue. Access is ultimately determined by both easily visible geographic components, such as driving or walking distances and times to food pantries, and less immediately obvious components like hours of operation, service territories, frequency of allowable visits, income limits, documentation requirements, foods available, treatment of pantry visitors and pantry distribution models. Each component will be examined in turn throughout this section.*

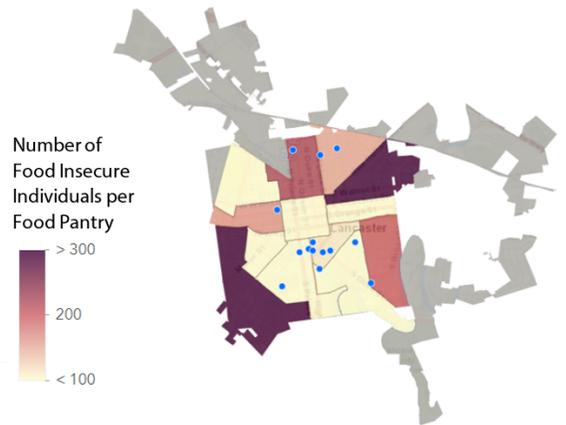
**Number of Food Pantries in a 15-Minute Drive by Census Tract**



**Number of Individuals per Food Pantry within 15 Minutes' Drive by Census Tract**



**Lancaster City: Number of Individuals per Food Pantry within 15 Minutes' Walk by Census Tract**



**Another important consideration is the number of food insecure individuals per accessible pantry for each census tract.** This analysis measures population-weighted access by dividing the number of food insecure individuals per census tract by the number of food pantries within a 15-minute drive to determine if there are pockets of the county with a high number of food insecure individuals but lower access to pantries.

Nearly every census tract in southern Lancaster County has more than 250 food insecure people but only one food pantry option within a 15-minute drive. In addition, these census tracts all share the same food pantry, and therefore there are more than 2,500 individuals who only have access to one pantry in southern Lancaster County.

Some of these 2,500 individuals may include Amish individuals who would be less likely to access a traditional food pantry because of religious and cultural practices. Even when adjusting for the Plain community, there are still between 1,500 and 2,000 food insecure individuals with access to only one food pantry in southern Lancaster County.

In addition, food pantries report at listening sessions that some Amish households do visit their food pantries, meaning that it is possible to reach this population in certain circumstances. Additional work should be done to better understand how charitable food can or should be made more accessible to Plain households who may be food insecure.

Northwestern Lancaster County, especially in the Elizabethtown and Mount Joy areas, has a notable number of food insecure individuals with lower access to food pantries in Lancaster County. Certain pockets of high need in northeastern Lancaster County, including in southwest Ephrata, Earl, and Upper Leacock Townships have a relatively large number of food insecure individuals per available food pantry.

A similar 15-minute walk time analysis for census tracts was performed for Lancaster County to better understand charitable food access in high population areas where many households do not have vehicle access, such as Lancaster City and Columbia. Outside of areas of Lancaster County with significant Amish populations, which lie mostly in the southern and eastern parts of the county, only Lancaster City, Columbia and the northern part of West Donegal Township have more than 300 households without access to a vehicle. Only a few areas outside of Lancaster City have access to a food pantry in walking distance, including Columbia, New Holland, Akron, Elizabethtown, Lititz, Millersville, Denver, and southern Ephrata.

In Lancaster City, the southwest corner of the city has the least access to charitable food providers within walking distance, with 750 food insecure people who have access in walking distance to just one food pantry. In addition, Census Tract 2 in the northeast quadrant of Lancaster City has 300 food insecure individuals within walking distance of a single food pantry.

## UTILIZATION OF FOOD PANTRY SERVICES BY CENSUS TRACT

Using pantry service records obtained through agency use of Feeding America’s online pantry intake system, Service Insights on MealConnect (SI-MC), and anonymized data-sharing with agencies countywide, the following analysis assesses experienced food pantry utilization gaps between July 2022 and June 2023.

The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, data about the number of unique individuals served by a food pantry at least once between July 2022 and June 2023 was aggregated from SI-MC and agency databases. In some cases, ZIP Code level data from pantry databases was allocated out to the census tracts within a ZIP Code so that all data could be considered in the same geography type. This provides a useful, though not fully complete, figure for the number of unique individuals from any given census tract who received food pantry services at least once in the analysis period. Step two was subtracting the service figures by census tract from Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap estimates by census tract; the result provides an estimate of the number of people who are food insecure but are not accessing pantries.

Although 85% of pantries with electronic tracking in the county were either on SI-MC or participated in the data-sharing initiative for the analysis period, it should be noted that not all of them did. This means that some gaps identified in the analysis may be the result of data limitations, although this risk is markedly lowered by the participation of the largest pantries. Others may be the result of Plain populations, who are unlikely to access the mainstream charitable food network even if they are food

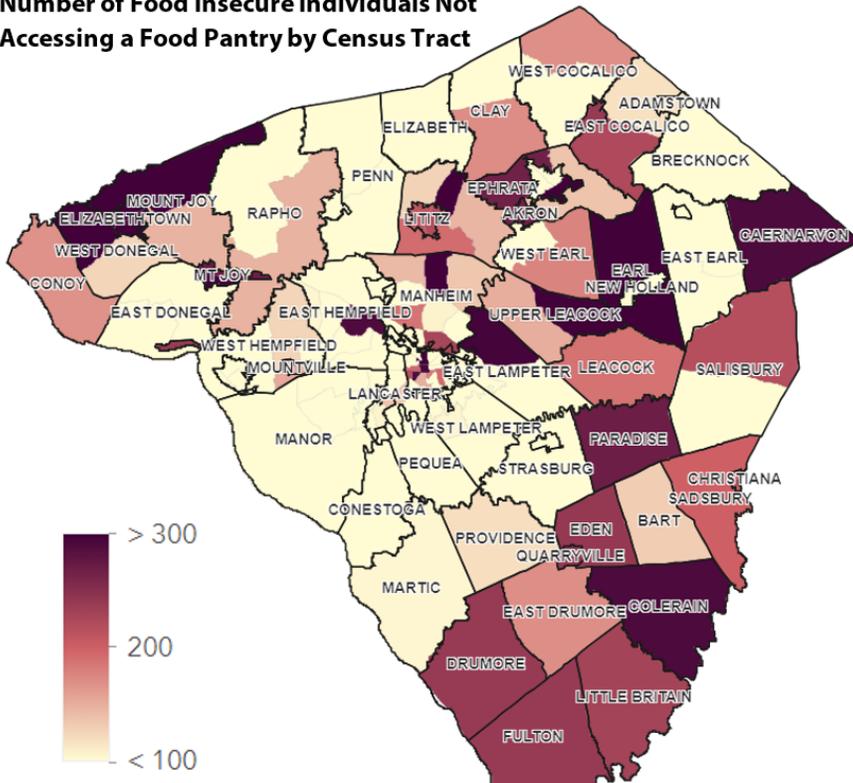
insecure. As more agencies onboard to SI-MC or build out sustainable data-sharing infrastructure over time, this metric will become more robust, but even in its initial phase it provides useful, actionable insights. For more detail on participating pantries and the methodology used for this analysis, please see the technical appendix.

The maps below show areas where there may be pantry utilization gaps. Census tracts where there are about 300 food insecure individuals who are not accessing food pantries lie in several areas, including along the Dauphin County border in and around Elizabethtown, in Mount Joy Borough, in part of East Hempfield Township along Route 283, in the Ephrata area (especially in southern Ephrata Borough), in the New Holland area, and Caernarvon Township in far eastern Lancaster County.

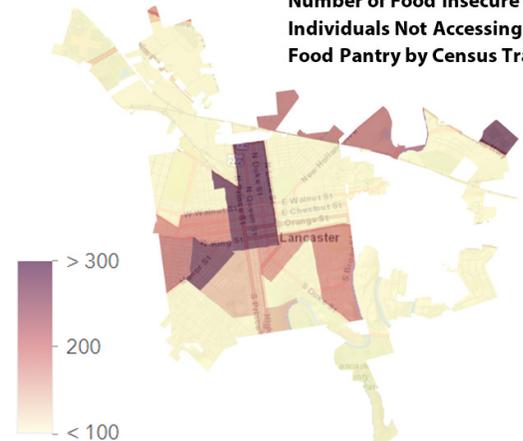
The Southern End of the county stands out as an area where there may be utilization gaps, as nearly all the census tracts south and east of Quarryville show at least moderately elevated numbers of food insecure individuals not accessing food pantries, and some, such as those containing Colerain and Paradise Townships, are among the highest in the county.

A focus on the City of Lancaster, as shown in the map below, reveals that there are access disparities within the municipality as well. In particular, the main downtown area and the Manor Street corridor appear to have very large differentials between their food insecure populations and the number of individuals who access a food pantry; other parts of the city with elevated, though less severe, access gaps include the Church Street corridor, parts of the SoWe neighborhood, and parts of southeast Lancaster.

**Number of Food Insecure Individuals Not Accessing a Food Pantry by Census Tract**



**Number of Food Insecure Individuals Not Accessing a Food Pantry by Census Tract**



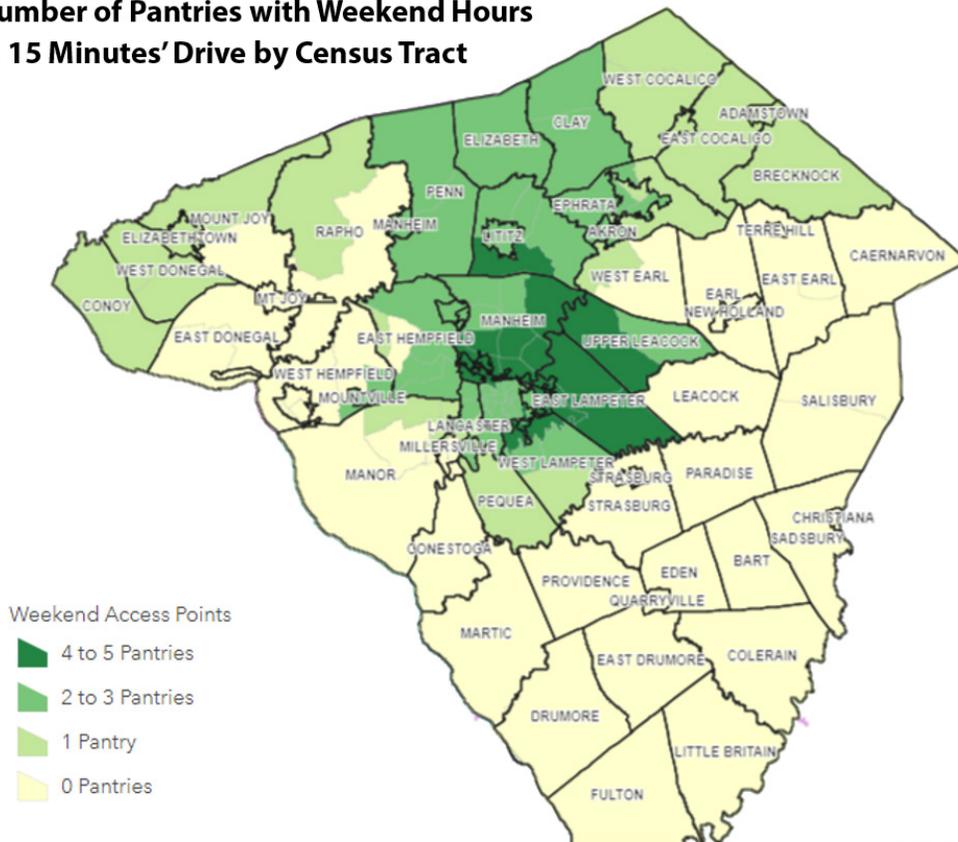
## DAYS AND HOURS OF OPERATION

Another basic access component is hours of operation; that is, the time frame in which a food pantry is open for neighbors to visit. As a basic principle to increase access and lower barriers, the charitable food should strive to maximize the number of food insecure individuals in Lancaster County who have access to a pantry that is open in off-hours, including evening and weekend options.

Weekend and evening pantry distribution hours are especially important because the majority of food insecure households of working age are employed full-time. Among neighbors surveyed who are not visiting a pantry currently, many indicated that the hours of operation are a barrier to access. This analysis identifies areas of the county where evening and weekend access is the most limited for neighbors.

To estimate the largest gaps in access to weekend and evening distributions, this analysis records the number of pantries within a 15-minute drive time that offer weekend and evening distributions. This 15-minute drive time analysis is a generous definition of access, as a 15-minute drive time is not accessible to all people, particularly for households without easy access to a vehicle. In addition, the full 15-minute drive radius would cover and cross several different municipalities, and one can reasonably presume that pantries in other areas of the county are likely less known to people than pantries that are in their own area. This means that neighbors who might be considered to have an accessible pantry in this analysis because there is one 15 minutes away do not have access in practice due to a lack of awareness. Therefore, any access gaps identified in this analysis should be considered relatively extreme, and there should be high confidence in the significance of the identified gaps.

### Number of Pantries with Weekend Hours in 15 Minutes' Drive by Census Tract



**Lancaster City Food Pantries: Number of Weeks Open Per Month By Weekday**

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Anonymized Food Pantries	4	4	0	4	4	0	0
	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	4	4	0	0	0
	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	0	4	0	4	0	0	0
	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
	0	4	4	0	4	0	0

The map below shows the areas of Lancaster County without access to a weekend distribution, revealing that the western, eastern, and southern parts of the county have no access to a weekend pantry distribution within a 15-minute drive. In total, 31% of food insecure individuals in Lancaster County do not have access to a food pantry with weekend distribution hours. An additional 19% of food insecure individuals have access to just one weekend access point.

**31%** of pantry visitors do not have access to a pantry with weekend distribution hours.

Again, the drive time analysis applies for households with easy access to a vehicle. Transportation is a major issue, particularly in areas of the county like Lancaster City with low access to vehicles. A similar 15-minute walk time analysis of weekend hours access in Lancaster City reveals severely low access to pantries on a weekend for households without a vehicle.

81% of food insecure people in Lancaster City and 85% of households without vehicle access do not have access to a weekend pantry within a 15-minute walk. This is also a relatively extreme measure of access; families who walk to their pantries still face the obstacle of needing to carry or cart products from the pantry to their home.

Just one pantry in Lancaster City has weekend hours, and it is only open once per month. No pantries in the city have Saturday hours. Only residents of the northeastern portion of the city have access to a weekend pantry (open one Sunday a month) in walking distance.

Overall, there are very few pantries in Lancaster County that are open on Saturdays, and the pantries that are open on Saturdays are typically once per month, as shown in the heat map in the bottom right of this page, with each row representing a pantry that completed the pantry survey and each column representing a day of the week.

Turning to evening access points, the map to the right shows that residents of the Elizabethtown area, pockets of East Hempfield, Manheim, Upper Leacock, and West Cocalico Townships, and a large swath of southern Lancaster County do not have access to food pantries with evening distributions.

Nearly a quarter of food insecure people in Lancaster County (23%) do not have access to evening hour distributions. An additional 18% have access to only one food pantry with evening hours.

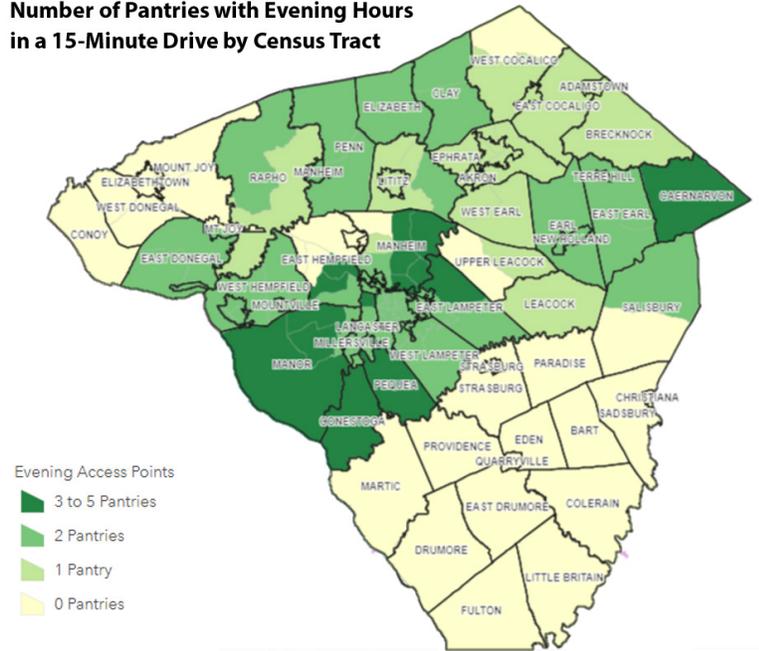
**23%** of pantry visitors do not have access to a pantry with evening distribution hours.

There is little overlap in the areas with lack of access to evening and weekend pantry distributions. The Southern End of Lancaster County is the sole exception. Most municipalities south of Paradise and Strasburg have no access to charitable food distributions on both weekends and evenings; that is to say, residents of the Southern End face the most severe access problems related to hours of operation outside of traditional business hours in the county.

In Lancaster City, just two pantries have weekday evening operating hours. These pantries are relatively centrally located, so 65% of food insecure individuals and 65% of households without vehicle access, located in the southern part of Lancaster County, have access to a pantry with weekday evening hours within walking distance.

It should again be noted that this evening access analysis identifies only the most extreme gaps. In addition, another major access issue is that some pantries run out of food before their distribution time is over. Services may be advertised as open in the evening, but in effect, anyone who comes in the evening may be turned away without food, with less desirable food, or less food overall.

**Number of Pantries with Evening Hours in a 15-Minute Drive by Census Tract**



**Lancaster County Food Pantries: Number of Weeks Open Per Month by Day for Each Food Pantry**

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
1	4	4	4	4	4	0	0
2	4	0	4	0	0	0	0
3	4	4	0	4	4	0	0
4	4	0	0	4	0	0	0
5	4	4	4	4	4	0	0
6	4	4	4	0	0	0	0
7	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
8	0	0	4	4	0	0	0
9	0	0	4	4	0	0	0
10	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
11	0	4	4	4	0	0	0
12	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
14	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
15	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
16	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
17	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
18	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
19	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
20	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
21	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
22	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
23	0	0	4	0	0	4	0
24	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
25	0	4	0	4	0	4	0
26	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
27	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
28	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
29	0	4	0	4	0	0	0
30	0	4	4	4	0	0	0
31	0	0	4	4	0	0	0
32	0	0	0	0	4	0	0
33	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
34	0	4	4	0	4	0	0
35	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

*“I’m just thankful that there are spaces that can help and supplement. It is appreciated.”*

**- Lancaster County Neighbor Survey Comment**

## SERVICE TERRITORIES

Collaborating at the system level, pantry leaders can work together to minimize barriers which prevent individuals from accessing food pantries that best fit their needs. Service territories are the geographic area, such as a ZIP Code, school district, or municipality in which food pantry visitors must live to receive regular food assistance from a given food pantry. Decreasing service territory restrictions and allowing greater frequency of visits when capacity allows would enable neighbors to choose food pantries that work best for their circumstances, including food preferences, time restrictions, and transportation arrangements. In addition, in suburban areas of Lancaster County, many pantries limit visits to once per month, which, in combination with service territory restrictions, can mean extremely limited access to charitable food for food insecure individuals in those areas.

A number of pantries in Lancaster County allow neighbors to visit from anywhere in the county, resulting in Lancaster County having significantly lower service territory barriers compared to other counties in Pennsylvania. However, the remaining pantry geographic restrictions still limit neighbor access, especially in regard to evening and weekend hours. Data from food pantry agency surveys shows that eliminating service territories would reduce the percentage of neighbors who lack access to evening and weekend distributions to 23% (from 31%) and 19% (from 23%), respectively.



## TRANSPORTATION

Sixty percent of pantry visitors surveyed across Lancaster County indicated they use their own vehicle to drive to a pantry. Nearly a fifth (18%) of responders rely on rides from friends or family, an additional 14% walk, and just 4% rely on public transportation. This can result in an even more complicated experience of accessing charitable food when neighbors must coordinate bus routes or navigate extreme weather conditions when walking, which can deter people from accessing needed pantry services. Columbia area survey respondents had the highest percentage of people indicating they walk to the pantry. Even so, a focus group participant noted “I live in an apartment building and there are elderly people that can’t get out. They can’t walk [to the pantry] and they can’t carry all that stuff because the bags are heavy.”



**18% of pantry visitors rely on friends or family for rides to get to their food pantry.**

Another person discussed the difficulty of navigating limited pantry hours and access to transportation, “I am legally blind and I don’t drive, so I’m constantly calling someone [to take me to the pantry]. But if they’re at work, there’s only Monday and Wednesday between like two hours that we can get there and it’s in the middle of the afternoon when everybody else is at work. So I can’t get there.” Other pantry visitors noted how difficult it was to coordinate public transportation and pantry opening times. This causes some pantry visitors to show up very early to pantries and can make visiting a pantry take a large portion of the day. Although analyzing bus route timing is outside the scope of this report, food pantries in Lancaster County could examine their individual pantry visitor data to determine where people are coming from and then work to align operating hours with bus schedules to their location.

Transportation difficulties and affordability impact over a third (35%) of pantry survey respondents, who indicated they must choose between paying for food and paying for gas or transportation. Through non-pantry surveys, several people who screened as food insecure indicated that a lack of transportation access is a main reason they do not access food pantries.

Some pantries across Lancaster County have developed innovative transportation models, including shuttles and on-call volunteer drivers to help pantry visitors overcome transportation challenges. This is greatly appreciated by pantry visitors, as a focus group participant in Ephrata reported, “It’s nice they have a shuttle service. It’s great for seniors because not everybody is able to get out of the house or get out of the house as easily.”

If a shuttle service or other transportation solution is not possible due to capacity constraints, an existing state policy allows for visitors to pantries that provide state or federally funded food to designate a proxy, such as a neighbor, friend, or caseworker, to pick up their food for them. Pantries could intentionally use this policy to help individuals with transportation difficulties still receive services.

## CULTURALLY RELEVANT CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS

Another component of access is the availability of foods that are relevant to the people accessing the charitable food system. This analysis represents a first of many needed steps to help the CFPB, HFLC, and food pantries provide foods that meet the preferences and needs of all neighbors. Lancaster County is rapidly diversifying and becoming increasingly Hispanic (the Hispanic population is now 11.1% of the county population, up from 8.6% in 2010). The charitable food system in the county therefore needs to ensure that its food offerings and services are adapting.

Every census tract in Lancaster County, except for nine census tracts in Lancaster City, had an increase in the Hispanic population between 2010 and 2020, with the largest increase occurring in more suburban areas.

Lancaster Township had the largest increase in Hispanic population – nearly 2,000 individuals (out of an increase of 16,000 Hispanic individuals countywide), but other increases occurred in southwestern Lancaster City and Manor, East Lampeter, Manheim, Lancaster, East Hempfield, Pequea, and Upper Leacock Townships, as well as Columbia Borough.

The increase in the Hispanic population is likely to continue as young people in Lancaster County are more diverse than the overall population. In 2020, Hispanic individuals over 18 made up just 9.5% of the total population of Lancaster County but accounted for 16.3% of the county’s residents under the age of 18.

It is essential to note that Hispanic populations, and all racial and ethnic groups, are not a monolith and that culinary preferences differ significantly by nationality. To give the charitable food network some of the information it needs to begin adjusting food pantry offerings and procurement to fit the preferences of the cultures represented in the population, this analysis also examines the different national ancestries in Lancaster County using data from the American Community Survey.

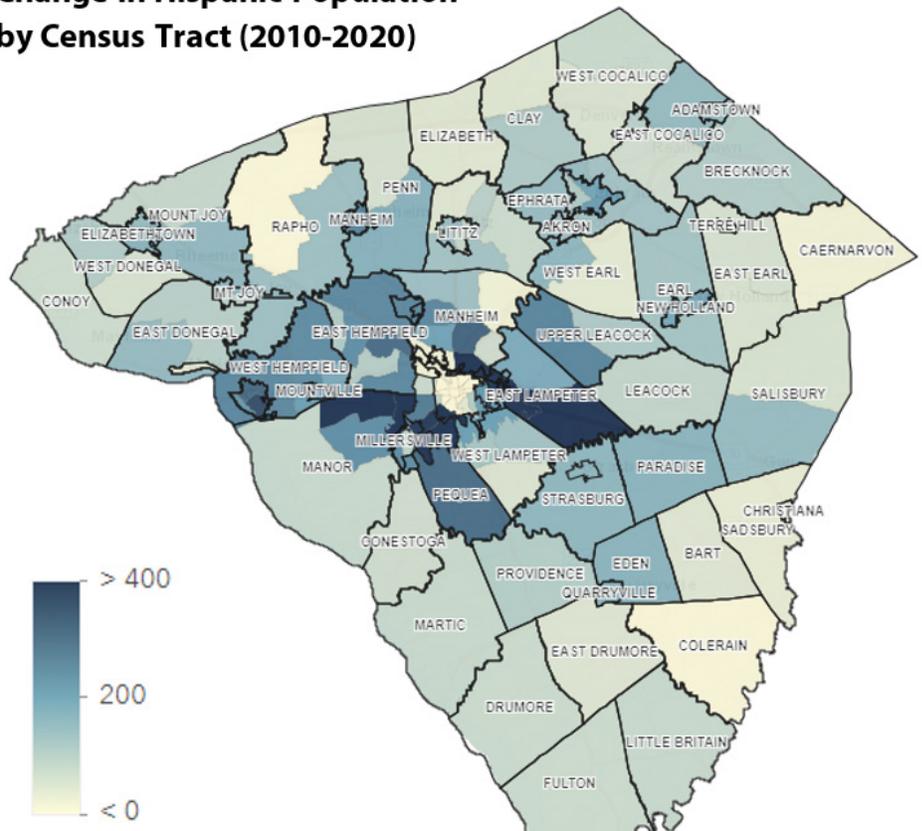
The table above ranks the county population by ancestry for all the top five ancestries for which more than 25% of their population was born outside the mainland United States. The analysis includes Puerto Rico, which is the largest Hispanic population group by far in Lancaster County – nearly seven times the population of the second and third highest ancestries of Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

People of Puerto Rican descent make up 7% of the overall Lancaster County population and nearly two-thirds (63%) of the total Hispanic population countywide. Dominican and Mexican populations make up another 18% of the Hispanic population in Lancaster. Individuals of Vietnamese and Colombian ancestry round out the top five groups but have significantly smaller populations than do people of Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Dominican ancestry.

To make the largest impact for the most people with culturally relevant foods, the charitable food system in Lancaster County needs to ensure that the foods they are offering are specific to the preferences of people with roots in these areas of origin, especially considering the extreme inequality in food insecurity by race/ethnicity in Lancaster County. An estimated 21% of Hispanic individuals in the county are food insecure, compared to 8.7% of the total population.

Rank	Place of Origin	Ancestry
1.	Puerto Rico	36,788
2.	Mexico	5,214
3.	Dominican Republic	5,064
4.	Vietnam	3,218
5.	Colombia	2,407

**Change in Hispanic Population by Census Tract (2010-2020)**

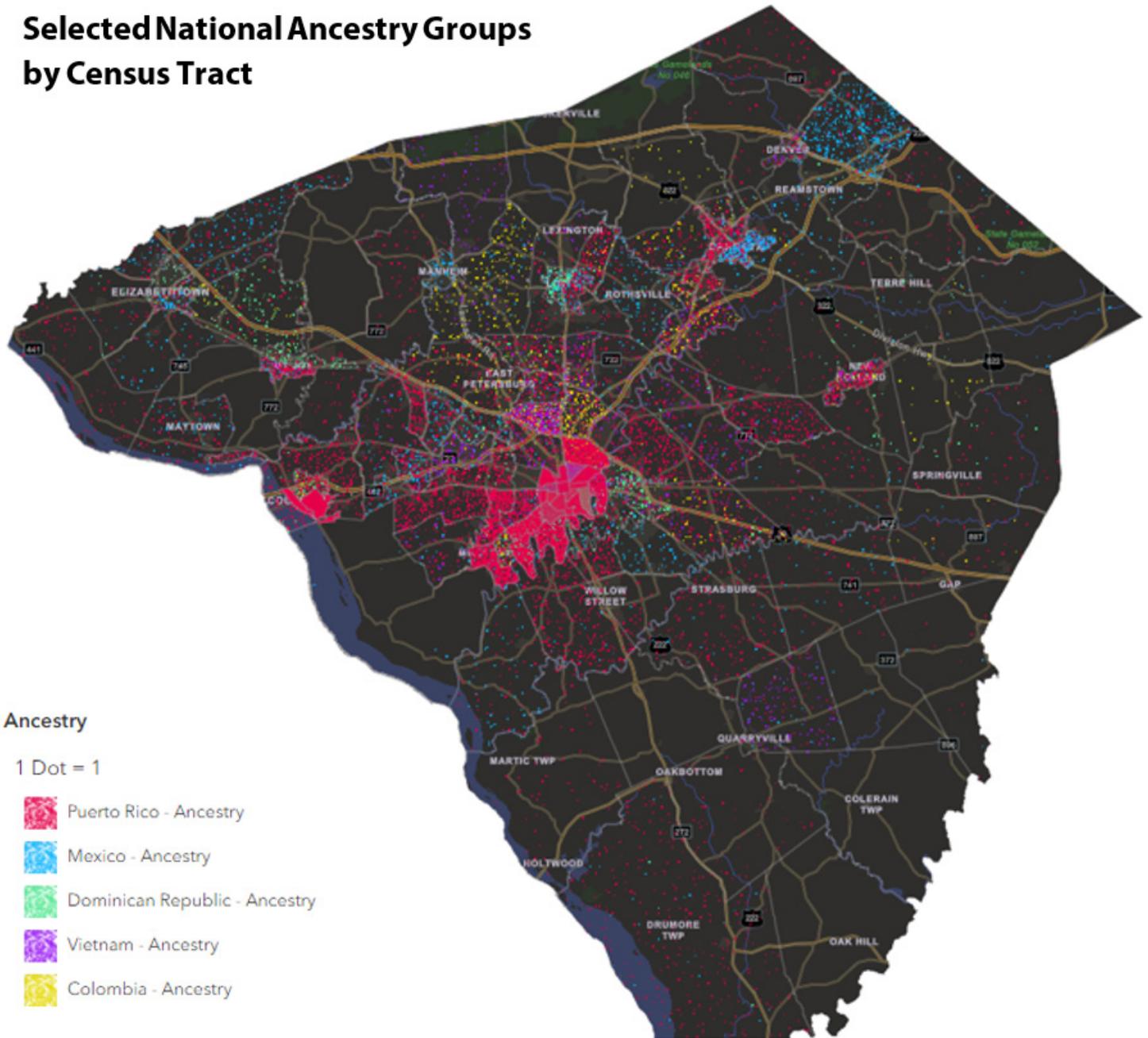


Key takeaways from the map below include:

- People of Puerto Rican ancestry are concentrated in Lancaster City and Township, Millersville, Columbia and West Hempfield, Ephrata, Akron, Mount Joy, New Holland, East Lampeter, and Upper Leacock.
- Lancaster City has the highest population of people with Puerto Rican ancestry in the county. Puerto Rican individuals are primarily concentrated in the southern half of the city (south of King Street), making up nearly 31% of the overall Puerto Rican population of the county.
- People of Mexican ancestry are concentrated in the Denver area and southern Ephrata, as well as in southwestern Lancaster City, Hempfield, and Manheim.

- People of Dominican ancestry mainly reside in southern Lancaster City (especially south of King Street) and Lancaster Township, East Lampeter, Mount Joy and Lititz.
- People of Vietnamese ancestry mostly live in and around Penn Township, Manheim Township, Upper Leacock, southern East Hempfield, northeastern and southwestern Lancaster City, and Quarryville, while people of Colombian background are concentrated in Manheim and Penn Township.

## Selected National Ancestry Groups by Census Tract



The map above shows which census tracts in which the five largest ancestry groups are concentrated. This map was developed using a plotting method in which one dot represents one person and each color represents a different nationality, so it can be used to judge the relative size and density of each group at a glance.

## SURVEY RESULTS AND FOOD PREFERENCES BY CULTURE IDENTIFIED WITH OUTSIDE THE MAINLAND UNITED STATES

One question asked in the neighbor surveys was if the respondent identified with any culture outside the mainland United States, and if so, which one. In Lancaster County, the two most common cultures survey respondents identified with were Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

This finding is broadly in line with the ancestry data analysis in the previous section. However, Dominican individuals are overrepresented, as there were as many responses from individuals who identified as Dominican as those who identified as Puerto Rican (40 each), even though the countywide Puerto Rican population is more than seven times that of the Dominican population. Additionally, people who identify with Mexico may be underrepresented, as there were only three respondents who did so even though the Mexican community in Lancaster County is about the same size as the Dominican community.

Potential reasons for the lack of representation of Mexican individuals may be the pantries at which surveys were conducted, that Mexican individuals chose not to answer this question, or that Mexican individuals do not visit food pantries as much as other groups. Further research should be conducted to examine whether there is a real pantry utilization gap among Mexican individuals and if so, how to make the charitable food system more welcoming.

The surveys asked neighbors to list two to three foods they need or want but cannot always get from the food pantry. Three-quarters (75%) of all survey respondents, regardless of ancestry, indicated at least one food preference they want but cannot always get, while 57% reported three food preferences.

The most common reported preference by far was meat, with 44% of respondents indicating that they would like but cannot always find meat at food pantries. Eggs and vegetables were tied for second at 12%, showing the large gap between meat and everything else. Produce and milk were the only other foods reported by more than 10% of respondents.

There were not major differences in the type of meat that food pantry visitors reported preferring by ancestry. The most common meat subcategory was a general preference for “meat” (63% of all respondents indicated preference for meat), followed by chicken (13%), and beef (8%). As shown in the table below, rice is the major differentiator between overall and preferences reported by people who identify with the Dominican Republic and with Puerto Rico. Notably, some neighbors simply wrote “Hispanic food” or “Puerto Rican” food as their preference, indicating that the charitable food system in Lancaster County has work to do to improve the cultural relevance of the items it offers.

Food Preferences by Reported Ancestry			
Rank	Overall	Puerto Rico	Dominican Republic
1.	Meat	Meat	Rice
2.	Eggs	Eggs	Meat
3.	Vegetables	Milk	Milk
4.	Produce	Produce	Vegetables
5.	Milk	Rice, Beverages, Vegetables	Eggs

## LANGUAGE ACCESS AT PANTRIES

At least one neighbor took a survey in Spanish at eight of the 11 food pantry survey sites across Lancaster County, indicating use of Spanish countywide. The median percentage of surveys taken in Spanish across the eight sites was 12%, and the maximum rate of Spanish-language surveys was 49% at one site in Lancaster City. In a more limited partner survey, a third of responding food pantries reported they had Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers available “often or always.”

This data indicates the importance of increasing the availability of Spanish-speaking and bilingual volunteers and staff at food pantries across Lancaster County, especially when considered in combination with the growing population of Hispanic individuals across all parts of Lancaster County and comments from food pantry coordinators of difficulty communicating.

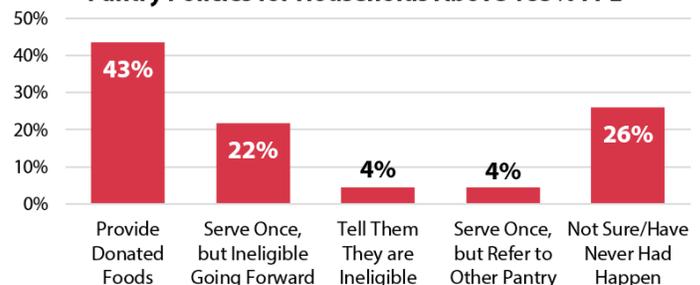
## OTHER BARRIERS TO CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS

Policies around income requirements and other documentation requirements act as barriers to food pantry access. Results of partner surveys show that two thirds of food pantries (65%) require [state issued] photo identification and half (52%) require proof of residency. Other pantries require additional information such as documents proving the presence of children in a household and proof of income. These requirements are above and beyond what is required and, in many cases allowable, for receipt of federally and state-funded food. These barriers may make it harder to access charitable food and can increase stigma. Pantries should evaluate their registration processes to determine what unnecessary barriers may be included and work to remove them.

In addition, confusion and uncertainty around the eligibility requirements for charitable food assistance raises additional barriers to households who earn more than the 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL) threshold used to determine eligibility for state and federally funded charitable food. The current guidelines do not account for the nearly 25,000 households defined by the United Way as ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) who are earning more than 185% FPL but still living paycheck-to-paycheck, and who may need help making ends meet.

ALICE households over 185% FPL have different experiences with the charitable food system depending on which pantry they visit. More than a quarter of all pantries report that they serve people who earn more than the income threshold once but inform them they are ineligible going forward or simply tell them they are ineligible without serving them.

**Pantry Policies for Households Above 185% FPL**





## FOOD PANTRY MODELS

Food pantries in Lancaster County distribute their food based on one of three following food pantry models:

- **Drive-through distributions**, where pantry visitors receive bags and boxes of food brought directly to their vehicles;
- **Pre-pack distributions**, where pantry visitors are given boxes of food that were prepared during or ahead of distribution time; and,
- **Client choice shopping distributions**, where pantry visitors walk through the food pantry and choose their own food from the pantry selection, much like a grocery store.

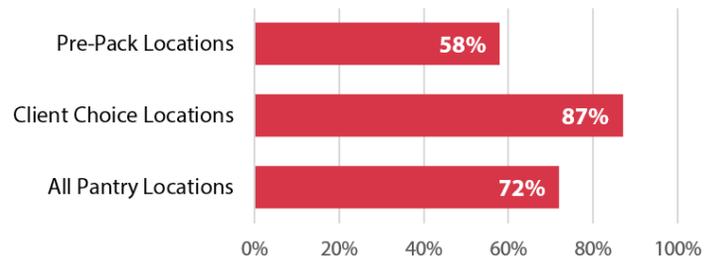
In practice, there is a spectrum of food pantry models rather than a dichotomy of choice vs. no choice. For instance, drive-through and pre-packaged distributions can and often do provide pantry visitors with some limited elements of choice if requested by pantry visitors, especially in cases of allergies. Pantries can provide neighbors with options for a few items, such as a choice of meat preference or establish a sharing table for products in a pre-packed distribution that they cannot use. Food pantry models can be divided into four levels: No Choice, Limited Choice, Modified Choice, and Full Choice. These models are described in more detail in the table below.<sup>12</sup>

**Client choice models are preferred by pantry visitors in Lancaster, regardless of what type of pantry distribution they currently attend.** According to the pantry visitor survey, 72% of all respondents prefer client choice shopping models.

*“...Some food [pantries] will just box up food and give it to you... But with this one, it’s very comfortable and accomodating in the fact that when you go in there, it looks like a grocery store and you can pick what you want.”*

*- Lancaster County Neighbor Interview*

**Percent of Pantry Visitors Who Prefer Client Choice by Food Pantry Distribution Model**



There are significant differences in preferences depending on which type of distribution people attend. Fully 87% of client choice pantry visitors prefer client choice models while 58% of pre-pack food pantry visitors prefer client choice. The differences in responses by pantry type are likely because there is some self-selection, as people choose the type of distribution they prefer when they are able, and people are used to the pantry model they visit.

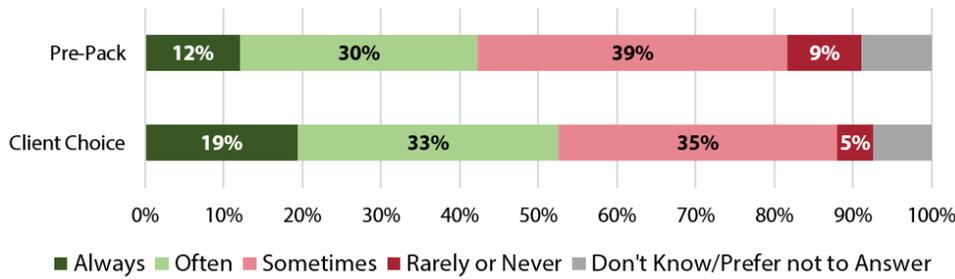
Client choice shopping models provide dignifying food pantry experiences by enabling pantry visitors to choose foods that best fit their needs and desires.<sup>13</sup> As such, pantry distribution model types are an important consideration related to access because pantry model types can affect individuals’ ability to select foods and reach a pantry based on their unique individual circumstances.

Greater choice and autonomy in the pantry means that neighbors are more likely to select and receive foods they need and want, including those that align with cultural preferences, health restrictions, and dietary needs. A focus group participant said the choice-shopping model “makes people feel better because they can come in and make their choices. It’s not like ‘here, give me a bag to take home and what do I do with it.’”

According to neighbor surveys, 52% of individuals from client choice model pantries ‘Often’ or ‘Always’ receive the foods they need or want, compared to 42% from pre-pack model pantries. Individuals from pre-pack model food pantries are nearly twice as likely to ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’ receive foods they need or want (9% vs. 5%).

No Choice	Limited Choice	Modified Choice	Full Choice
Every neighbor gets the same, predetermined items.  Volunteers/staff handle the food and prepare bags or boxes for neighbors.	Neighbors can choose among a few types of prepacked boxes or receive a prepacked box and can choose certain items from a table.  Neighbors typically do not touch or handle the food directly.	Neighbors may select from general food types such as soup or cereal by selecting items from a menu or telling volunteers what items they want by pointing.  Volunteers/staff then pack the box for neighbors.	Neighbors may select from specific flavors or brands such as chicken noodle soup or Cheerios by shopping for food, similar to a grocery store or ordering online for specific items.  The site may set limits on quantity to select, but neighbors may freely handle and select foods.

### Frequency of Receiving Desired Foods by Food Pantry Model



Client choice models also have lower reported food waste. “You are getting what you need and what you want. You don’t have all this excess,” a focus group participant shared. “You might not eat Frosted Flakes, but somebody else is looking for Frosted Flakes. You’re not throwing Frosted Flakes away because you don’t eat them.”

In the pantry visitor survey, over half of respondents (55%) from client choice pantries reported zero food waste compared to 43% respondents from pre-packed distributions, and a total of 93% of respondents at client choice pantries reported less than 10% food waste compared to 78% at pre-pack pantries.

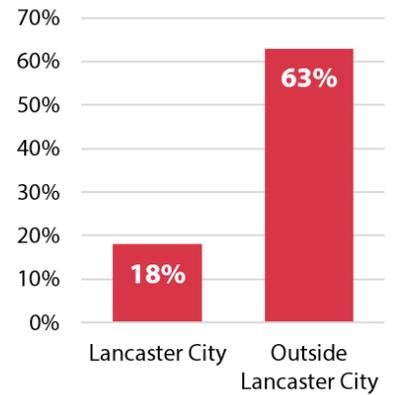
Although choice-shopping distribution models are beneficial in many ways, drive-through or pre-pack models are needed by individuals who prefer them and have limited time, transportation, or mobility. The ease of access and relative anonymity of some drive-through and pre-pack distribution models can be helpful to neighbors who are unable to or prefer not to walk through a food pantry. Furthermore, drive-through and pre-pack distributions can be good alternatives to appointment-style client choice pantries, for individuals who have difficulty reaching their specific pick-up times due to transportation or time limitations.

Overall, there is a large presence of client choice pantries across Lancaster County. Fully 97% of food insecure people have access to a client choice pantry within a 15-minute drive, and 81% of food insecure individuals have access to two or more client choice pantries within a 15-minute drive.

While this analysis shows that many Lancaster County food pantries have adopted client choice models, it does not mean that client choice models are accessible to everyone in all areas of the county. Transportation access is a concern especially in areas like Lancaster City where a high proportion of residents have low access to vehicles.

Food pantry agency surveys showed that there are fewer client choice shopping pantries in Lancaster City overall, as just 18% of the food pantries in Lancaster City offer client choice shopping distributions. This means there are more than 3,000 food insecure people in Lancaster City per client choice pantry. Meanwhile, 63% of pantries outside of Lancaster City offer client choice food distribution models. Individuals in Lancaster City therefore have less choice and variety in the foods they can obtain at pantries.

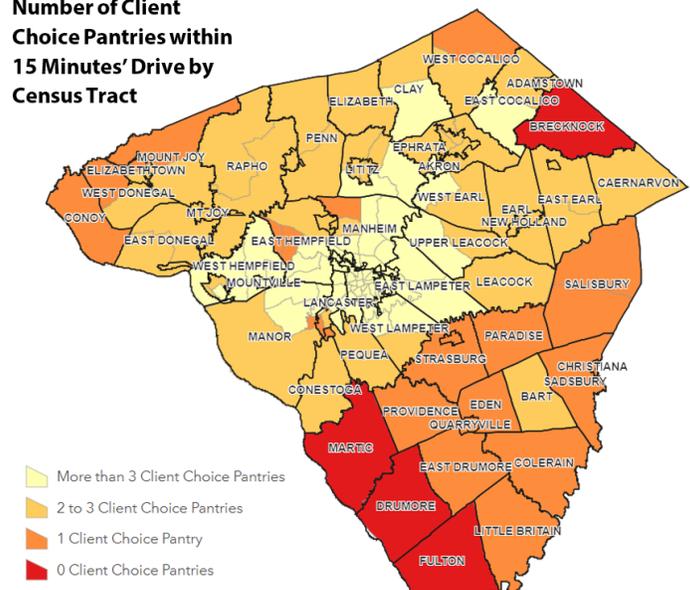
### Percent of Pantries with Client Choice Offerings



In Lancaster City, the southern half of the city has the most access to client choice pantries within walking distance. Though there are relatively few client choice pantries in the city, they are for the most part centrally located, within a 15-minute walk of most food insecure individuals in Lancaster City. Around two-thirds of food insecure residents (67.9%) and 64.9% of households without vehicles in the city have access to a client choice pantry in walking distance, leaving one-third of food insecure households and households without vehicles who do not have access to a client choice pantry within walking distance.

Interactions with partners and neighbors demonstrate a strong preference for choice and autonomy within the charitable food system. If food pantries cannot offer full choice, there are steps every pantry can take to increase choice as much as possible and move along the choice continuum. Not every pantry has to adopt a client choice model to meet neighbors needs and preferences, especially because some neighbors do prefer pre-pack or drive-through distributions. The charitable food system should work to ensure that every person in Lancaster County has access to and is aware of both client choice and a pre-pack or drive-through distributions.

### Number of Client Choice Pantries within 15 Minutes' Drive by Census Tract



## NEIGHBOR EXPERIENCE AT FOOD PANTRIES

How neighbors are treated during a pantry visit has a direct impact on their future utilization of charitable food and social services. A positive food pantry experience is characterized by welcoming volunteer interactions, easily navigable pantry spaces, relevant and quality food offerings, and minimal barriers to access. Although changes to the neighbor experience can be difficult to quantify, track, measure, and report, it is critically important that the charitable food system continually progress towards a kinder and more equitable experience for food pantry visitors.

## VOLUNTEER TREATMENT

Each interaction a neighbor has with a pantry staff member or volunteer matters. Just one negative interaction at a food pantry can turn an individual away from seeking charitable food, especially if they already feel shame or embarrassed for seeking assistance. All programs, regardless of current volunteer practices, can work towards a better neighbor experience through ongoing training of volunteers on trauma informed practices, emotional intelligence, and empathetic service.

Much of the reported stigma and many of the negative experiences associated with visiting a food pantry come from negative interactions with pantry volunteers. Stigma is manifested through prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping, whether explicit or implicit. In the food pantry setting, stigma is reproduced through judgment, poor treatment, or over-policing of pantry visitors through food distributions. These negative experiences cause harm and lead individuals to anticipate repeated poor treatment in similar spaces.

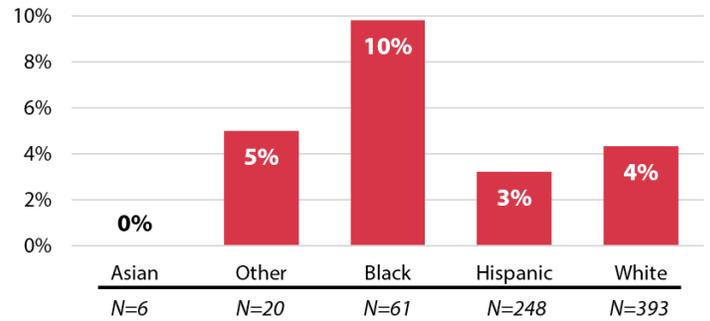
Pantry visitors are very sensitive to how they are treated, and many recalled specific experiences in great detail to share in focus groups, survey comments, and individual interviews. The detail with which neighbors recalled these experiences indicated that they had a significant and lasting impact on them:

“A volunteer has said to me “don’t take too much because there are cameras and we’ll have to take it back from you in the parking lot,”” a focus group participant shared.

“If you don’t look like you are poor, you get looked at like you don’t need to use [the pantry]. But they don’t know your story,” another focus group participant said.

“I think sometimes because I am younger the older volunteers are not as nice or understanding. I feel like I’m not as welcome every now and then. Sometimes I have more of a need that week and have to ask if they have diapers in the back and I ‘get that look.’ I don’t [want to be made to] feel that way [when I] come to get help because I am already feeling that way coming to get help,” said a third focus group participant.

## Percent Feeling Judged by Race/Ethnicity



Some participants noted friends and neighbors who “need the help” but are reluctant to attend a pantry for these exact reasons. A neighbor who participated in a focus group and who did not have access to transportation stated, “[A pantry] is a place you don’t want to ask someone to take you.”

Through neighbor surveys, pantry visitors in Lancaster County report some feelings of judgment during pantry visits.

Neighbors who responded affirmatively to this question were then asked if they felt they knew why they experienced judgment. These responses are a direct report of what neighbors experience when they access charitable food services. Because pantry visitors experience Very Low Food Security at a high rate, the charitable food system must take neighbor reports about stigma and prejudice seriously to ensure that all neighbors are treated equitably and so that people do not choose to go hungry rather than coming back to a food pantry.

Pantry visitors who report negative interactions at pantries shared detailed experiences with CPFBR researchers during surveys, interviews, and during focus group conversations facilitated by an external party. Feelings of judgment at pantries may be underreported because neighbors who no longer attend a pantry due to poor treatment are not included in the surveys.

There are also significant differences in reports of being judged by race/ethnicity. Black individuals are more than twice as likely as Hispanic and white individuals to report feeling judged at a pantry.

These results show how important it is to examine assumptions about the causes of food insecurity and the reasons why a household may seek assistance from the charitable food system. Negative assumptions can become entrenched in the attitude of staff and volunteers who interact with neighbors, so it is critically important that pantry leadership increases their awareness of structural racism and historic marginalization in Lancaster County. This presents an opportunity to reflect on mission statements and organizational values to ensure they are aligned with practices centered on equitable treatment for neighbors. A pantry that is committed to serving all individuals with respect and dignity will be better equipped to recognize the compounding impact of trauma on individuals experiencing food insecurity and avoid causing additional harm.<sup>14</sup>

## FOOD PANTRY SETTING

The environment of a food pantry matters in providing neighbors with a dignifying experience. People notice when they are in a welcoming place or a place for “poor people” and avoid a food pantry if they anticipate poor treatment or being stigmatized.

“I was hesitant going through a food pantry before this, to be honest, because the ones I’ve seen weren’t very clean, or, you know, organized,” an interview participant shared. Fortunately, her new and current food pantry proved to be tidy and “run smoothly.”

Poor pantry organization and infrastructure is uninviting to neighbors, as it confirms stigmas they already anticipate when entering the food pantry. A focus group participant reflected this sentiment when distinguishing their food pantry’s environment from that of what they anticipated. “They are happy to see you. When you walk in, it’s not run down like it hasn’t been used in 75 years. It is cared for. It feels good to walk in there. It’s not a closet to help the poor.”

Similar pantry visitor comments recognize inviting and user-friendly food pantry spaces as pleasant sites of community: “[It’s like] a little shop. You get a grocery cart. It’s well lit. People (are there) to help you. And they give you a chance to look. It’s not just [someone saying] ‘Here’s a bag, I did my community thing.’ You look forward to coming,” another focus group participant said.

Part of reevaluating the use of pantry space includes outdoor space, especially if neighbors are likely to wait outdoors before or during a pantry distribution. Adverse weather conditions are unpleasant at best and at worst will prevent people from accessing a needed resource if they lack weather-appropriate clothing or have health conditions that would make standing outdoors for an extended period unsafe. Physical space is often limited, and organizations may not have the funds or ownership of a space to complete large renovations; in these situations, some creativity may be required to protect people from the elements. Pantries that have lines should assess potential ways to reduce them in the future, including aligning pantry opening hours with bus schedules where appropriate and ensuring that food offerings are the same at the beginning and end of distribution.

## FOOD OFFERINGS

A few of the pantries who participated in neighbor surveys indicated they make specific accommodations for individuals who are living in motels, shelters, or are unsheltered. Pantry visitors are responsible for alerting staff to their situation. The Lancaster County Food Hub packs specific bags with single-use food items, including bottled water, pop-top canned goods, and smaller portions for houseless individuals to use. A few client choice pantries offer a larger number of items (such as microwavable foods) to “make up for” leaving behind items like frozen foods or ingredients they cannot utilize in their current living situation.

A pantry visitor in Lancaster City noted that her food pantry has improved its food offering varieties since incorporating short surveys for neighbors to indicate allergy and food preferences into their distributions. “You know, when they have choices, you can mark whether you’re gluten free, or diabetic or whatever, and they try to give you food that’s appropriate to your diet. They do a lot better with that.”

She requested that similar surveys become available for individuals who have marginal access to specific cooking amenities. According to neighbor surveys, 6% of food pantry visitor households do not have access to a stove or oven, 3% do not have access to a microwave, and 4% lacked a refrigerator.

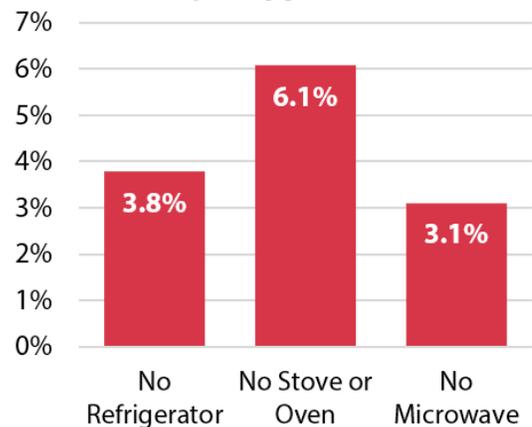
Neighbors request the quantity of the foods they receive be consistent with the number of individuals in their household. “If I tell them I have seven (people in my household, they give you) the same amount as someone who has 2 or 3,” another pantry visitor in Lancaster City said. “I wonder why they ask you how many people (are in the household) if they are going to give you the same (amount).”

According to food pantry agency surveys, around two-thirds of partners (62%) provide more food to larger households instead of one standard amount across all households. Two food pantries reported that families “take what they need”, and one food pantry said they give extra dairy products to food boxes for larger families. Wherever possible, pantries should scale distributed food by household size.

Additionally, at least three pantries participating in neighbor surveys provided grocery bags (both paper and plastic) for pantry visitors to pack their food in. For some pantries who provide an abundant offering of food, this is especially useful as bags are easier for neighbors to manage and mirror the experience of grocery shopping, which is less stigmatizing. Many client choice pantries encourage visitors to bring reusable bags or used donated bags. This was especially helpful for people who walk or take public transportation.

In addition to number of food offerings, pantries should continue to closely check the foods they offer to ensure that they are not spoiled. Neighbors overwhelmingly reported concerns with receiving expired and outdated foods. This is especially notable because receiving spoiled and unsatisfactory foods is the main reason individuals in Lancaster have stopped visiting pantries, according to the non-food pantry surveys.

**Percent Without Access to Major Appliances**



## PANTRY EXPERIENCE AND SOURCING

The neighbor experience at pantries is heavily impacted by the barriers and hardships that pantries themselves face in operating. Through surveys and listening sessions, food pantries reported concerns with several factors that impact their operation. Food sourcing, finances, and storage are the primary concerns of many pantries that combine to create a situation in which many pantries struggle to get affordable, high-quality food when they need it.

Food pantries expressed difficulty with limited availability of delivery times in which they could schedule their orders, and sometimes the inconsistency of delivery timing. Accurate delivery windows are crucial for many pantries who have set their distribution schedule based on delivery calendars to receive fresh produce and temperature sensitive items, like milk, eggs, and cheese, just before their distribution. Like neighbors, several pantry partners were concerned with the quality of the retail and charitable food deliveries they receive. Some pantries reported having to discard entire orders of food or quickly adjusting food offerings right before distribution times. This can limit the amount of food a pantry is able to distribute, and especially disrupts pantries that distribute foods based on meals or recipes.

Pantries also report difficulty sourcing specific products. Meat and non-meat protein sources provide a necessary nutritional component to neighbors' diets and are the among the most requested products from both neighbors and pantries but are expensive and hard to acquire. Dairy, produce, and eggs were highly requested by both neighbors and food pantries as well. According to partner listening sessions, these foods are also first to run out during a food distribution.

Pantry sourcing strategies vary across organizations, with many pantries expressing how complicated it was to source food. Food pantries decide which foods to source based on a variety of factors. In order by most frequent response, pantries said they order foods based on 1) Potential to become a full meal using a recipe, 2) Staple or 'base' foods, 3) Inventory availability, 4) Cost efficiency, 5) Nutritional guidelines, 6) By word of mouth from neighbors, 7) Calorie density of different food options, 8) Through food preference surveys and suggestion boxes.

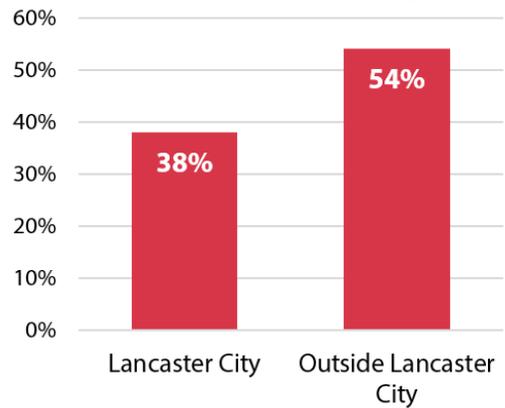
Pantry coordinators must take storage availability into consideration when making food orders. Those with limited refrigerator, freezer, or shelf space can only order and distribute an amount of food that they are able to store within their facility. Ordering and storage capacity varies by location as well. Pantries in Lancaster City, especially those located in majority or plurality Hispanic areas report lower storage capacity than pantries outside of Lancaster city.

Many pantries expressed confusion about how to navigate competing food sourcing priorities, such as cost, neighbor preferences, and pantry capacity. Lack of adequate funding, inflation, and increased need have placed pressures on pantries to make hard decisions regarding product quality, quantity, and funding.

"We are spending more than we are bringing in right now," a partner shared during partner listening sessions. These sessions were conducted in February and March, right before the end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments period. A few partners shared that they struggled to keep up with the increasing need and hope to be able to provide a consistent amount of food for everyone.

Food pantries shared they appreciated the opportunity to gather and discuss shared challenges and successes through partner listening sessions. Collective meetings can be useful on a quarterly or bi-annual basis to identify opportunities for learning and collaboration together.

**Percent of Pantries with Ample Dry & Refrigerated Storage**



# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Section 2 Finding 1: Food pantries are among the lowest-barrier social service providers. Yet many access barriers remain.**

These include geographic access, hours of operation, service territories, documentation requirements, income requirements, strict visit frequency limitations, foods offered and pantry models, languages spoken by staff and volunteers, and treatment of pantry visitors.

### **Recommendation: Pantries should lean into the role of serving as the lowest-barrier social service access points.**

This status as the lowest-barrier social service access point gives pantries a unique role in their communities, increases trust, and allows pantries to connect people more easily to resources. Pantries should lean further into this role and reduce the remaining barriers. Hunger-Free Lancaster County (HFLC) should coordinate efforts to reduce barriers to accessing charitable food and measure progress on an annual basis over time.

## **Section 2 Finding 2: There are opportunities for increased communication among food pantries in Lancaster County and a clear role for HFLC in supporting collaboration.**

Pantry listening sessions indicated that potential areas for increased collaboration include sourcing guidance, as many pantries find sourcing complex and confusing and many have substantially divergent sourcing strategies. Pantries also appreciated the opportunity to meet with one another and expressed a desire to meet again in the future.

In addition, there is a lack of awareness among neighbors and food programs regarding other existing services and food pantries. Neighbors are often unaware of pantries other than the one they visit, as visiting more than one pantry in a month has sometimes been explicitly or implicitly discouraged in the past.

### **Recommendation: HFLC should develop resources to support food pantry operations, and facilitate regular regional and countywide gatherings for further collaboration.**

Resources for HFLC to develop include sourcing guides, materials to assist pantries in determining neighbor food preferences, and informational sheets to enable and encourage referrals across pantries or to other services in Lancaster County. Further, HFLC and its key members could work to connect pantries to additional retail and farm sourcing opportunities. In addition, HFLC should facilitate regional and countywide gatherings of food pantries to discuss challenges, opportunities, and progress towards shared goals. These gatherings would provide HFLC an opportunity to connect with pantries who do not regularly attend meetings.

## **Section 2 Finding 3: Southern, southeastern, and northwestern Lancaster County have limited geographic access to charitable food.**

Some areas of Lancaster County, particularly Mount Joy, have geographic access to charitable food but do not have sufficient access due to service territory requirements of surrounding pantries excluding certain areas.

### **Recommendation: The charitable food system and HFLC should make capacity investments in existing pantries in or near underserved areas and evaluate potential new partnerships.**

Pop-up pantries at key locations could help to determine and test potential demand in identified areas without committing intensive capital resources right away. Mobile pantries are also an option, but these can require substantial initial investments and upkeep. Expansion of strategically located pantries to offer additional appointments or services can be another long-term solution.

The network should also work to reduce or eliminate service territory restrictions in key areas, such as Mount Joy and southern and southeastern Lancaster County to increase access more quickly.

# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 2 Finding 4: A pantry utilization map at the census tract level reveals areas of potential underutilization of the charitable food system relative to the number of food insecure individuals.**

Areas around southern Ephrata, certain parts of East Lampeter Township, Upper Leacock Township, Earl Township, Mount Joy, Elizabethtown, most of southern Lancaster County, and central Lancaster City have the largest pantry service gaps, as measured by the difference between the number of food insecure individuals and the number of individuals who access a pantry. In addition, while 18 of the largest pantries and most pantries with electronic tracking are included in the analysis, not every pantry's services are included, so some of the service gaps currently identified may be partly attributable to gaps in reporting.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should work to improve resource targeting with collaborative census tract level maps over time and test pop-up or mobile distributions in identified areas.**

This census tract level access map represents one of the first estimations of lived food pantry utilization gaps at the census tract level, but it does not contain all data due to data sharing and electronic tracking limitations. Pantries should conduct outreach to identified areas near their sites and potentially test pop-up distributions. HFLC should coordinate efforts to update this map every year and include more and more pantries. Further, pantries across Lancaster County should work to adopt electronic tracking tools, such as Service Insights on MealConnect, to simplify the neighbor intake and data sharing process. Over time, the census tract service gap map will provide a more holistic picture of access gaps and strongly inform decisions and capital investments.

**Section 2 Finding 5: There is especially limited access to food pantries in Lancaster County on weekends, with just a few open on weekends anywhere in the county and most of these open one weekend a month. Evening access is more readily available but still relatively limited.**

A total of one in three (31%) food insecure individuals do not have access to weekend distributions, and one in four (23%) lacks access to an evening distribution.

Off-hours pantry access such as weekend and evening access is particularly important to ensure that families with working household members can access food. Over one-third of pantry visitors already work full-time, but there are likely a substantial number of additional working households unable to access charitable food during workday hours, as indicated by non-food pantry surveys.

**Recommendation: HFLC and its members should coordinate with food pantries to modify opening hours to ensure everyone in the county has access to a weekend or evening food pantry distribution.**

Not every pantry needs to be or should be open all the time, but if pantries coordinate with HFLC's support, the charitable food system can ensure that every food insecure person in Lancaster County has access to an off-hours pantry. It is similarly important to ensure that pantries open in the evening do not run out of food or have reduced food options in the evening hours, as this issue can make evening access "in name only."

Eliminating service territory restrictions would reduce the percent of people who lack access to a weekend and evening distribution to 23% and 19%, respectively.

**23%** of pantry visitors do not have access to a pantry with evening distribution hours.

**31%** of pantry visitors do not have access to a pantry with weekend distribution hours.

# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 2 Finding 6: Lancaster County has large populations of families with limited English proficiency experiencing food insecurity, and they often face language barriers at food pantries they visit.**

In neighbor surveys, Spanish was the language of choice of at least one person at nearly 75% of food pantries but only about a third of food pantries report having a Spanish speaker often or always available.

Lancaster County has diversified significantly in recent years and in the last ten years, the Hispanic population grew in nearly every census tract outside of Lancaster City. The county is now home to more than 36,000 Puerto Rican individuals as well as sizable Mexican and Dominican communities.

**Recommendation: Pantries should seek out Spanish-speaking staff and volunteers with support from HFLC, who should conduct a full inventory of pantries to better understand language accessibility.**

Cultural competency is an important part of serving neighbors equitably. Pantries should seek out Spanish-speaking staff and volunteers. HFLC should conduct a complete inventory of all pantries to see what languages their neighbors speak and if these pantries have regular volunteers who speak those languages. HFLC can cultivate relationships with Spanish-speaking churches and other organizations to coordinate volunteering with nearby food pantries.

In addition, it can under no circumstance be a requirement or expectation either explicitly or implicitly, but neighbors who visit pantries can make great volunteers. HFLC could develop guidance for pantries for having food pantry visitors as volunteers. A general rule is that pantries should only give directions to food pantry visitors on how to sign up to volunteer if the neighbor visiting the food pantry says they would like to volunteer unprompted. This helps ensure that an unequal power dynamic does not pressure neighbors to volunteer.

**Section 2 Finding 7: Just over half of food pantry visitors say they receive food they like from their food pantry “Always or Often.”**

A total of 40% say they “sometimes” receive food they like while the remaining 8% say they “rarely or never” receive food they like. Offering food people “often or always” like results in 63% fewer visitors reporting significant food waste (more than 10%), compared to offering food people “sometimes” like. The most requested foods that are not always available at food pantries are meat, eggs, vegetables, produce, and milk. When broken down by ancestry, people of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent also report rice as a food they want but cannot always get.

**Recommendation: There is room to improve in providing foods people like at pantries. Food pantries should allow for feedback from neighbors more regularly while HFLC should provide sourcing guidance.**

Food pantries should always have suggestion boxes available for people to provide feedback on what foods they would like to see and as they are able, pantries should offer short surveys on foods people want. Very few pantries reported suggestion boxes during agency listening sessions.

In addition, pantries should ensure that they offer rice to neighbors during pantry distributions. HFLC and its members should also talk with cultural organizations to gain feedback on what other specific foods may be most desirable for Puerto Rican and Dominican individuals.

**1/3** of food pantries report having a Spanish speaker often or always available at food pantry distributions.

# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

## Section 2 Finding 8: People who visit food pantries prefer client choice pantries, regardless of the distribution model of the pantry they visit.

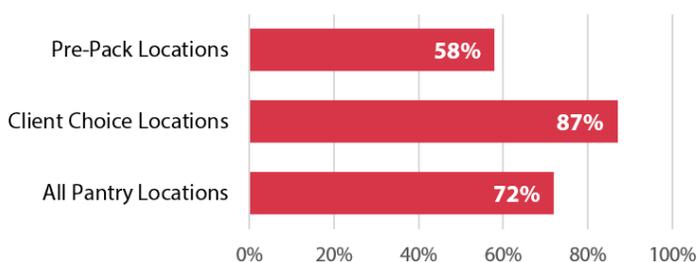
Choice pantries increase the likelihood that people receive food they like and can use and thereby reduce reported food waste. Lancaster County has significant choice pantry access across the county, as just 3% of food insecure individuals do not have access to a choice pantry within a 15-minute drive.

Some neighbors indicated that drive-through and pre-pack pantries work better for them, especially if they lack transportation access and are unable to easily stick to a predetermined appointment.

**Recommendation: Food pantries should prioritize client choice models where possible, but choice is a spectrum and every pantry should work to increase choice as much as possible regardless of their pantry model.**

Everyone in Lancaster County should have access to a food pantry distribution that meets their needs, including access to a variety of service models. Not every pantry needs to do everything for everyone. HFLC can coordinate pantry models and services across the county to ensure food pantries are working together on being the most accessible system possible.

**Percent of Pantry Visitors Who Prefer Client Choice by Food Pantry Distribution Model**



## Section 2 Finding 9: Each interaction a neighbor has with a pantry staff member or volunteer matters and can impact pantry visitors' willingness or desire to come for food again.

Much of the reported stigma and many negative experiences associated with visiting a food pantry come from negative interactions with pantry volunteers. In addition, Black pantry visitors report feeling judged at more than twice the rate of white or Hispanic visitors (10% vs. 4% and 3%, respectively).

**Recommendation: Pantry workers should be trained in culturally sensitive and trauma-informed care practices so they are equipped to treat all visitors with respect and dignity, while pantry coordinators should regularly assess volunteers' suitability in neighbor-facing roles.**

Volunteers and staff that are unable or unwilling to participate in trainings or establish a welcoming atmosphere should be reassigned to positions that do not interact with neighbors.

HFLC should develop and promote trainings for partner agencies and their staff and volunteers on culturally sensitive and trauma-informed care practices. In addition, HFLC should develop guidance on accountability practices for food pantry staff and volunteers.

The neighbor experience is impacted by the pantry environment, so pantries should work to develop physically welcoming environments that have the potential to foster community within the space while also offering privacy during intake processes and limiting visitors' exposure to harsh weather before or during a distribution.

# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 2 Finding 10: Food pantries have inconsistent policies around providing services to households who earn more than 185% of the federal poverty line and who therefore do not qualify for federally or state-funded charitable food.**

About 30% of food pantries either turn these households away or only serve them once. This is a major issue because more than 25,000 ALICE households who live paycheck to paycheck but earn more than 185% of the federal poverty line live in Lancaster County. These households are primarily concentrated in and north of Lancaster City.

**Recommendation: Pantries should have uniform policies to serve people over 185% of the federal poverty line with privately funded food, as there should be no wrong door for any household seeking charitable food.**

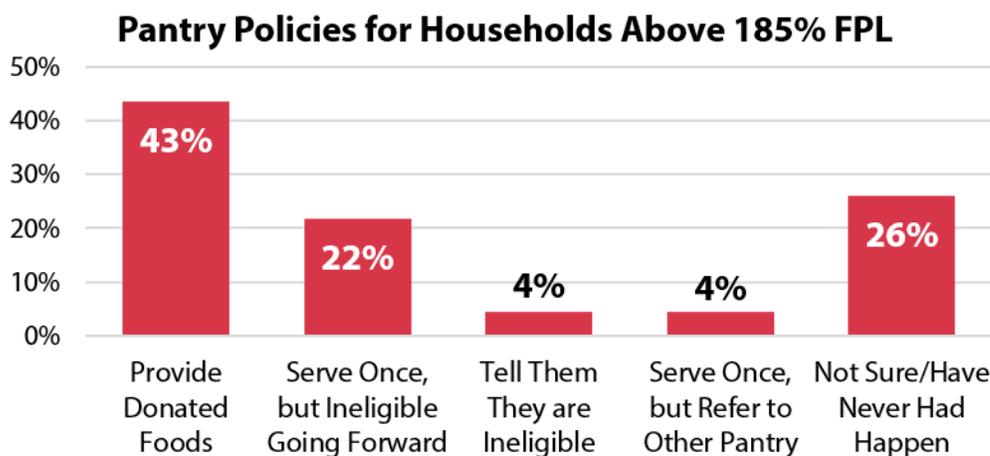
This is particularly important because a household who is turned away from the charitable food system once may decide to not come again. HFLC and its members should write out and communicate this clear policy to serve people over 185% of the federal poverty line with donated food and assist pantries who need help with implementation.

**Section 2 Finding 11: Many pantries require additional documentation beyond the self-declaration of need form required for use at agencies providing food funded by the federal and state government.**

Two-thirds of pantries (65%) require a photo ID, 52% require proof of residency, and some pantries require attendance at classes or meetings with social workers. In addition, many pantries, especially in suburban areas outside of Lancaster City, limit visits to once per month.

**Recommendation: Food pantries should strive to be the lowest barrier social service organizations and ensure documentation requirements are as low as possible.**

HFLC should help unite pantries around the idea of being the lowest barrier part of the social service system and help to communicate minimum documentation requirements to pantries. Additional documentation requirements at intake as well as classes when offered should always be optional. In addition, visit frequency restrictions should be loosened when pantries have sufficient capacity.



# CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 2 Finding 12: Pantries in Lancaster City report lower storage capacity than do those located in suburban or rural parts of the county, especially in majority or plurality Hispanic areas.**

Pantries in Lancaster City are less likely to use a client choice distribution model than pantries outside the city, although they are more likely to allow people to come back more than once per month.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should invest in under-resourced pantries, particularly in high food insecurity census tracts within Lancaster City to increase equity in service across the county.**

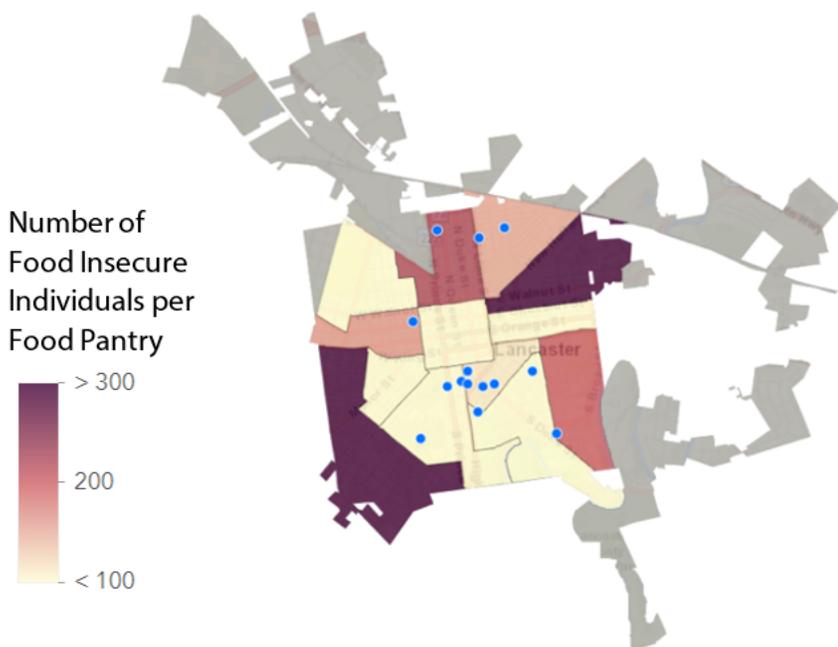
It is critically important to focus on reducing inequities faced by historically marginalized communities.

**Section 2 Finding 13: Current pantry users report expired or spoiled food as a key issue and former pantry visitors cite food quality as a main reason that they no longer use the charitable food system.**

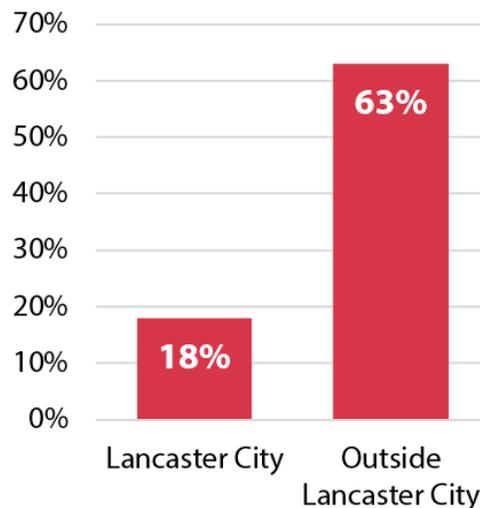
**Recommendation: All parts of the charitable food system must be vigilant about the quality and freshness of food, especially produce.**

Produce is difficult to keep, but it is one of the most requested foods by neighbors. To help, organizations should implement quality assurance processes for produce. Pantries should have and share information about expiration dates and when shelf-stable foods are still good to use. HFCL can help develop guidance for pantries in this regard.

**Lancaster City: Number of Individuals per Food Pantry within 15 Minutes' Walk by Census Tract**



**Percent of Pantries with Client Choice Offerings**





## SECTION III: UTILIZATION OF KEY GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS IN LANCASTER COUNTY

### PANTRIES ARE TRUSTED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Many food pantry visitors see “their” pantry as a community space for social connection and a way to get assistance with access to services other than food. Food pantries offer an opportunity to build connections with neighbors and provide information about additional services. This includes targeted efforts at pantries to complete outreach, and organic, mutual-aid interactions which occur in the pantry space among visitors and volunteers. Pantries that partner with health organizations for outreach report increased trust in these organizations from pantry visitors and staff<sup>15</sup> which may increase positive health outcomes in underserved communities. These interactions potentially reduce stigma and lower barriers when they occur in spaces where visitors are comfortable, compared to navigating formal institutions.

Government programs are perceived by pantry visitors as difficult to navigate. Paperwork takes time and necessary documentation may be difficult to obtain. Eligibility requirements and income thresholds are not well understood, leading some eligible families to miss out on benefits they are entitled to receive. In Lancaster City, help with paperwork was cited as a way pantries can meet community needs, especially with documents requiring translation or internet access to complete.

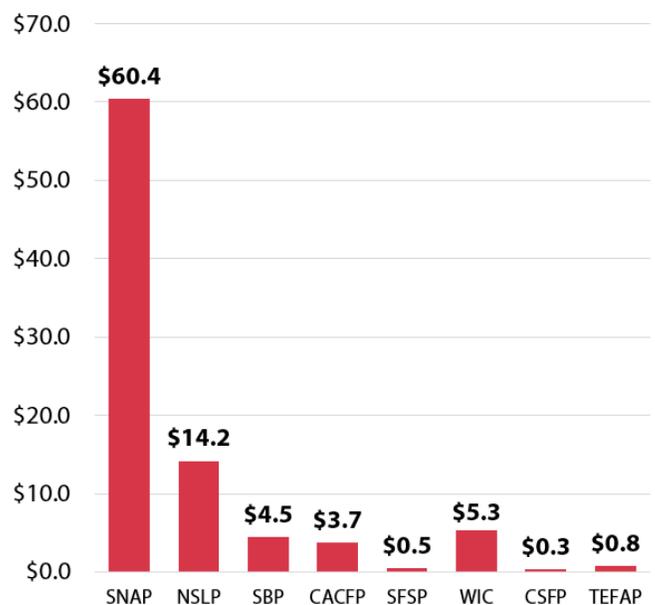
The charitable food system is just one part of the equation to reducing food insecurity in Lancaster County. Several government programs, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provide far more meals to families in need than the charitable food system. In fact, for every meal the charitable food system provides, SNAP provides nine.<sup>16</sup>

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the next largest nutrition assistance program, while the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) rounds out the top three in terms of federal expenditures on permanent nutrition programs.<sup>17</sup> Other, smaller, federally funded nutrition programs include the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

The figure below shows program expenditures in FY2019 which is the last full year before COVID-19 programmatic changes, and the closest approximation of likely spending proportions going forward. The eight largest programs and their corresponding program expenditures are shown in the figure below. SNAP dwarfs all other programs, making it the most important food security support in the nation.

Therefore, to achieve the goal of reducing food insecurity, the charitable food system must actively leverage available federal resources and encourage participation in federal government programs among the food pantry visitor population, utilizing its unique position as a trusted community asset and the lowest barrier social service providers. This report provides a deep dive into the state of participation for these key government programs in Lancaster County and provides recommendations on specific areas for focused geographic programmatic outreach.

**FY2019 Program Expenditures  
(in Billions \$)**



## SNAP PARTICIPATION

SNAP is the most important nutrition assistance program in the United States by a wide margin. SNAP is four times larger than NSLP, 12 times larger than WIC, and 80 times larger than TEFAP as of FY2019. Eligibility is determined by household size and income, with benefits made available via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, which can be used to buy fresh and frozen foods at most grocery/supermarket retailers. Because EBT works like cash, recipients have the freedom to choose items that suit their cultural preferences, meet specific dietary needs, and budget spending over time. SNAP thus promotes dignity, autonomy, and choice, making it a very well-designed program.

SNAP reduces very low food insecurity,<sup>18</sup> thereby directly contributing to the goals of the charitable food system to ensure that no one is hungry. In addition, the survey results in Lancaster County show that SNAP participation among pantry visitors reduces the chances that people must choose between food and other necessities. SNAP participants in the neighbor survey were eight and 13 percentage points less likely to report choosing between rent/mortgage or utilities, even though SNAP participants are lower income on average than non-SNAP participants.

In Lancaster County, 55,904 individuals, just over 10% of the total population, participated in SNAP as of April 2023. SNAP participation is currently above the COVID-19 pandemic high of 53,662 in April 2020, but lower than the record levels in the Great Recession. SNAP participation in Lancaster County increased dramatically during the Great Recession and gradually fell in the long recovery but has remained elevated due both to increased need and to program changes that expanded eligibility and made it easier to apply.

Pennsylvania is one of the highest performing states in terms of SNAP participation rates, outperforming 42 other states according to a recent USDA report.<sup>19</sup> **However, Lancaster County underperforms in SNAP participation compared to surrounding counties and to the rest of the state.**

- Lancaster County's SNAP participation rate is in the bottom half of the state – ranked 43rd out of 67 counties in Pennsylvania and is much lower than York, Lebanon, and Dauphin counties.
- Some of the gap can be explained by the Amish population, which overall is much less likely to participate in SNAP due to religious reasons. Even after adjusting for Plain communities, Lancaster County ranks 35th in SNAP uptake.
- This means there is considerable room for improvement and makes increasing SNAP participation in Lancaster County an excellent opportunity for charitable food system actors to make a major difference in reducing food insecurity.

<sup>i</sup>ZIP Code level population maps were produced in collaboration with Steve Nolt, the Director at Elizabethtown College's Young Center on Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.

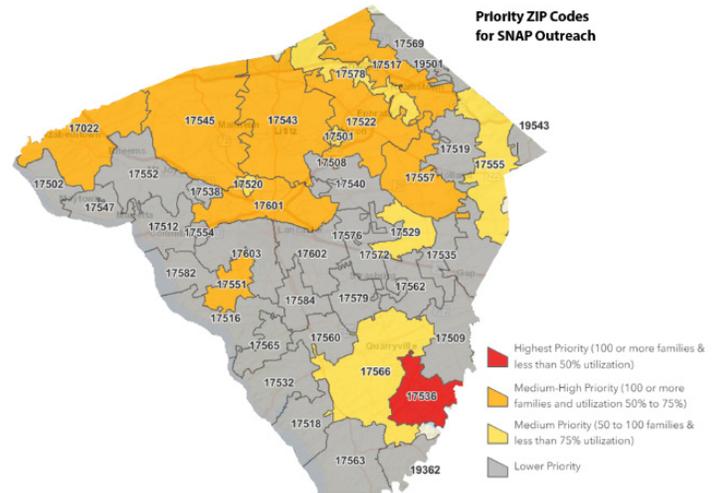
<sup>ii</sup>Full methodology is described in the technical appendix.

## ZIP CODE SNAP PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS

To determine whether there are geographic areas of Lancaster County to focus on for increasing SNAP participation, this analysis creates four typologies according to the potential return on investment generated by geographical-based outreach (through geo-targeting advertisements, in-person advertising events, pantry referrals, or other methods). Priority level is determined by the estimated number of eligible but unenrolled families and the SNAP utilization rates for a given ZIP Code.

The results of this analysis and prioritization are shown in the map to the right and the corresponding table, which shows the top five priority ZIP Codes in Lancaster County for geographic SNAP outreach. The ZIP Code level map and estimates are adjusted for the presence of Amish families<sup>i</sup> who may have incomes that qualify them for SNAP but who are very unlikely to participate in SNAP or other government assistance programs for religious and cultural reasons.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the method of analysis uses family participation rates which excludes college students in most circumstances, so the results are not impacted by college students.<sup>ii</sup>

The areas identified as high or medium-high priority include 41% of the county's population but 63% of all likely SNAP eligible families who currently do not participate in SNAP, demonstrating the return on investment of focusing community outreach resources in these areas. The five largest participation gaps, adjusted for Amish populations are listed in the table below.



ZIP Code	Post Office Name	Family SNAP Participation Gap Number	Family SNAP Participation Rate
17536	Kirkwood	293	9%
17522	Ephrata	499	58%
17601	Lancaster	434	62%
17022	Elizabethtown	296	51%
17557	New Holland	248	56%

## SNAP PARTICIPATION AT FOOD PANTRIES ACROSS LANCASTER COUNTY

Surveys at 12 food pantries across Lancaster County show that SNAP participation is low even among people who visit food pantries. SNAP participation among pantry visitors is just 50% on average, with a median participation rate of 49%. The finding from the surveys is directly in line with data for the pantries currently utilizing Service Insights on MealConnect (an electronic neighbor intake tool) in Lancaster County, where the average and median of SNAP participation rates for these pantries are 43%.

These data points confirm that SNAP is underutilized, even among food pantry visitors that are likely eligible. Restricting the SNAP participation analysis to survey respondents who earn below the poverty level shows that just 56% of households who earn less than 100% FPL are participating in SNAP. Further, just 48% of households who earn between 100% FPL and 150% FPL and 46% of households earning between 150% and 185% FPL are participating in SNAP. These households make up 84% of all pantry visitors and are very likely eligible for SNAP but are not participating, meaning there are other barriers besides income eligibility preventing these households from participating in SNAP.

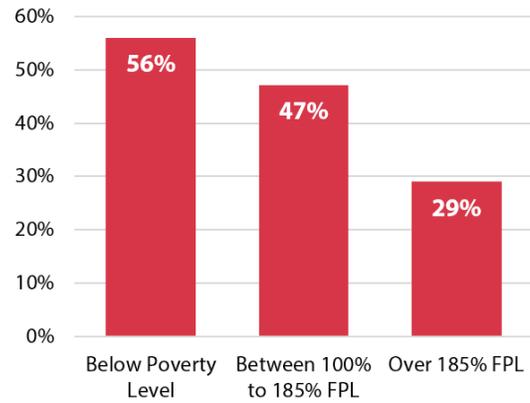
Though SNAP participation among seniors in the state of Pennsylvania lags participation rates for other households, senior SNAP participation rates for elderly households overall are roughly in line and even slightly above SNAP participation rates for other food pantry visitors (52% to 50%). Elderly living alone households who visit pantries have the highest SNAP participation rate of any household type (57%), while senior two-person households have the lowest participation rate (44%). Overall, SNAP participation is roughly similar across household types.

## REASONS FOR NOT PARTICIPATING IN SNAP

Of the households who do not participate in SNAP, 40% reported that they have never previously applied for SNAP. Over half of respondents (54%) reported not applying for SNAP because they did not think they were eligible. An additional 14% said they believed it was too hard to apply, and 18% cited personal or other reasons, including pride, and working on citizenship documentation.

Of the respondents who had applied for SNAP previously, 39% reported that their SNAP benefits were stopped, with the main reason being that their income was too high, followed by people missing their recertification deadline. A mere 5% of people whose SNAP benefits were stopped reported that they were stopped due to not meeting work requirements. This response frequency is likely low because work requirements have not been in place for Lancaster County since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**SNAP Participation Rate by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level**



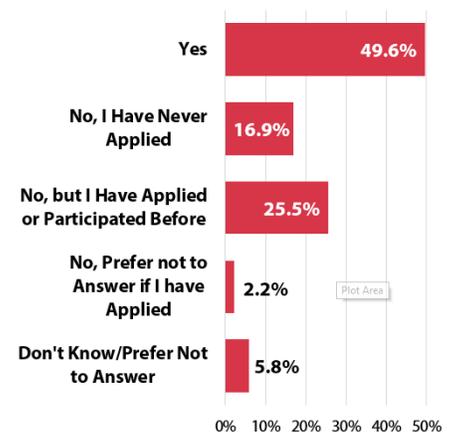
## OUTREACH IMPLICATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF SNAP PARTICIPATION

Overall, these results show that 17% of pantry visitors in Lancaster County have never applied for SNAP. An additional 26% have previously applied for SNAP but are not currently participating. While some neighbor households are likely ineligible for SNAP, 84% of food pantry visitors report earning less than 185% of the federal poverty line and are much more likely to be eligible for SNAP than the general population.

Three quarters (73%) of people who do not think they are eligible for SNAP earn less than 185% of the federal poverty level and 42% earn less than 150% FPL. In addition, more than 80% of people who reported that their SNAP benefits were stopped or that they missed the recertification deadline have incomes below 185% FPL, and more than half have incomes less than the federal poverty level. This means that information about SNAP eligibility as well as confusion with application and recertification paperwork are likely major barriers for SNAP participation for many food pantry households. This situation represents a major opportunity to increase SNAP participation by concentrating outreach at food pantries.

While pantries should encourage people to enroll in SNAP, SNAP participation should never be a precondition for receiving charitable food and, conversely, participation in SNAP should not be a reason to limit the number of times people can visit a food pantry. People have many reasons for not applying for SNAP, including personal reasons, and the charitable food system and individual pantries must respect these decisions. However, promoting SNAP, reducing the stigma around utilizing the program, and helping to ensure that people are aware of the program, its eligibility criteria, and have access to SNAP application assistance if they want it, is a natural extension of the work of food pantries and the charitable food system.

**SNAP Participation and Application History among Food Pantry Visitors**



## IMPACT OF THE END OF THE SNAP EMERGENCY ALLOTMENTS

Part of the federal government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 was a program flexibility for SNAP called SNAP Emergency Allotments. This meant that SNAP participants received the maximum benefit amount for their household size, regardless of the regular payment amount for which they qualified. Participant households who already qualified for the maximum payment received an extra \$95. March 2023 was the first month without Emergency Allotments, resulting in an average drop in SNAP benefits per person of \$95 per month in Lancaster County from February to May 2023.

This 37% drop in SNAP benefits resulted in a significant increase in demand for charitable food of at least 15% from the first week of March to the first week of April. The drop in SNAP assistance and the corresponding immediate rise in demand for charitable food assistance demonstrates how closely tied the charitable food network is with SNAP. People are trying to put together resources to have enough to eat, so when SNAP benefits fall, utilization of the charitable food system increases. The presence of the charitable food system may also make participation in SNAP less pressing, especially for households who qualify for only the minimum benefit.

Unfortunately, the end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments means that SNAP outreach will be more difficult. More households will find it less worthwhile to apply for SNAP if they qualify for the minimum amount (\$23 a month for one or two-person households). The increased pressure on the charitable food system resulting from the end of the SNAP emergency allotments makes it even more important that the charitable food system encourages all households to participate in SNAP if they qualify.

Within the charitable food system, food pantries are an accessible community resource, and the relationship pantries have with the individuals they serve can be leveraged to promote and assist with SNAP applications. For individuals who need food assistance but who are not currently attending a pantry distribution, targeted geographic outreach is needed. This is often most successful when outreach focuses on a particular demographic of people who are already enrolled in services whose program eligibility parameters are like SNAP, such as those receiving Medicaid<sup>21</sup> or individuals frequenting community meal programs, but other innovative methods such as geotargeting advertising could be useful as well.

## WIC PARTICIPATION

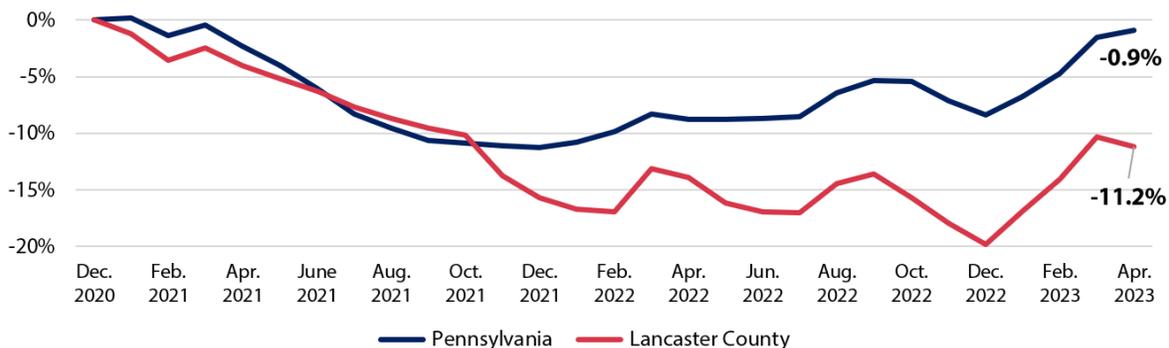
WIC is the third largest federal nutrition program and is administered by the USDA, which provides cash grants to states to implement the program. To qualify, applicants must have incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty line (\$55,500 for a family of four in 2023) and be considered nutritionally at risk by a health professional. Eligible participants include pregnant, post-partum, and breastfeeding individuals, and infants and children under age 5. Applicants already receiving SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are automatically considered income eligible. However, the full application for and utilization of WIC benefits is much more complex than SNAP.

The WIC program provides participants with access to specific nutritious foods considered to be lacking in their diets. Health professionals match participants with one of seven food packages based on comprehensive nutrition and screening assessments, which determine the types of foods participants can redeem using their WIC benefits. Interviews and conversations with neighbors revealed the process can be extremely arduous and time consuming for participants. “[WIC] was helpful for the formula coupons. But... I had to drive my baby to the center of Lancaster where there was a ton of screaming kids that were all sick,” a focus group participant from Paradise said. “It was chaos and then she had to get pricked for tests and measured. It was a lot to get formula for.”

Food packages indicate the maximum allowable amount of food a participant can purchase each month based on their status (e.g., pregnant, partially breastfeeding, fully breastfeeding, or postpartum) and need. These food packages may limit individuals’ access to acquiring foods they need or want. “You can only get certain stuff ... and it’s very specific. A certain brand of milk. A choice of beans or vegetables. You have to have stuff with protein, but you can’t get any meat which is weird,” a focus group participant and pantry visitor in Columbia said.

According to the PA WIC webpage, the average value of a monthly WIC food package is \$65 for adults, \$105 for infants, and \$50 for children; participants can only purchase food with their WIC benefits from stores that accept WIC Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Cards. Furthermore, unlike SNAP benefits, WIC benefits do not carry over into following months if they are not spent, meaning they must use all their benefits by midnight on the last day of each month before their balances reset. Because of this administrative requirement, there is an additional gap between the number of participants and the number that use their full benefits.

Percent Change in WIC Participation Relative to Dec. 2020



WIC participants in Pennsylvania must bring their EBT cards to their local WIC office every few months to have their benefits recharged, since Pennsylvania is one of just nine states that still utilizes an offline EBT system.<sup>22</sup> The constant county office visits cause disruptions in participants' routines at work and in their homes. "It would take almost half the day to get in and out of WIC, taking up time from work," a focus group participant and pantry visitor from Paradise said. Participants are also required to bring their children to these visits, meaning "you have to take your kid out of school too," a second focus group participant said.

This extra administrative burden placed on WIC participants has led to a further divergence in participation for Pennsylvania and the other eight offline EBT states compared to the rest of the country since the COVID-19 pandemic. Lancaster County has been acutely affected by this drop in WIC participation. Since December 2020, Lancaster County has experienced the second largest absolute drop in WIC participation of any county in the state, with nearly 700 fewer individuals participating in WIC in April 2023. As shown in the figure above, while state WIC participation rates fell initially but have since nearly fully recovered, Lancaster County's WIC participation fell further and remained 11.2% below participation in December 2020.

The decrease in WIC participation has not been experienced evenly across the county. ZIP Codes 17602 and 17603 in Lancaster have experienced the 2nd and 4th largest drops in the state, losing 590 and 410 participants respectively since the start of the pandemic and November 2022. ZIP Code 17522 in Ephrata is the only other ZIP Code in Lancaster with a loss of more than 100 WIC participants during that timeframe, at 110. These drops in WIC participation over the last three years align with overall participation gaps identified in the Lancaster County Hunger Mapping interim report. Pantry surveys show that WIC participation among likely eligible pantry participants with children under the age of six is low. Median WIC participation at pantries is just 35%, with an average of 37%.

## CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

### FEDERALLY FUNDED CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

The federal Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) are a key method of ensuring that all children get the nutrition they need to live healthy lives. The largest of these are the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which provide free or low-cost lunches and breakfasts to school-aged children in participating public and private schools. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides free or low-cost meals and snacks to children in daycares and afterschool programs, children in emergency shelters, and some disabled adults in day care programs. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) allow community organizations and school food authorities to provide meals to children in the summer when schools are closed. This analysis focuses on programs for which school food authorities (SFAs) are intended to be the primary sponsor, including NSLP, SBP, and SFSP.

## THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM (NSLP) AND SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM (SBP)

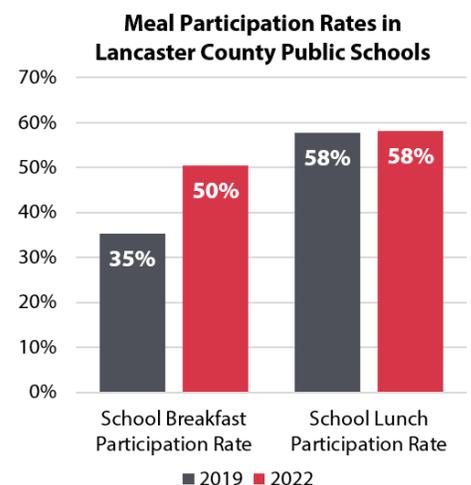
Lancaster County public schools were identified as targets for child nutrition program participation outreach if more than 25% of school-aged children (between age 6 and age 17) living in the school district lived in households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty line and if building-level participation rates for lunch and breakfast were below the statewide average participation rates among traditional public schools of 56% and 53% respectively. For more detail regarding methodology, please see the technical appendix. It is important to note that the 53% participation rate for breakfast means that just over half of children *who ate lunch* also ate breakfast, not that half of enrolled children ate breakfast.

The schools that meet these criteria to be considered targets for charitable food system outreach include JP McCaskey High School and Phoenix Academy at the School District of Lancaster, Solanco High School, Pequea Valley High School, Ephrata High School, Garden Spot Middle School in Eastern Lancaster County School District, Penn Manor High School and Central Manor Elementary School in Penn Manor School District, as well as Conestoga Valley's High School, Middle School and Brownstown Elementary School.

In addition, although they have been excluded from the target school analysis due to lack of available poverty data, Lancaster County CTC, Lancaster Mennonite School, and Resurrection Catholic Schools all did not participate in SBP in 2022 despite participating in NSLP, and all should be considered target schools for this reason. The technical appendix of the report contains a table that includes all NSLP-participant schools and their participation rates in Lancaster County.

It is important to highlight the impact of Governor Wolf's free breakfast initiative, which began in October 2022. This initiative made school breakfasts free to all students at participating schools, regardless of income and without the need to submit a free/reduced lunch application.

In Lancaster County's traditional public schools, breakfast participation rates were 43% higher in October 2022 than in October 2019, which is the last year for which there is comparable data. Meanwhile, lunch participation remained effectively flat, as it was not affected by any eligibility expansions. This dramatic increase in participation in breakfast, but not lunch, is strong evidence of the power of universality to improve uptake of the federal child nutrition programs.



## SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM (SFSP) LOCATION ANALYSIS

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally funded child congregate meal program intended to alleviate child food insecurity in the summer, when schools are not open and school breakfasts and lunches are not available. This is a crucial program at a time when children, who already face the highest food insecurity rates among all age groups, are at most risk of going hungry.<sup>23</sup>

Both school districts and community organizations may sponsor SFSP sites. School food authorities can take advantage of the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the National School Lunch Program to provide year-round meal service with a minimum of administrative barriers. The experience for children receiving meals at SFSP or SSO sites is very similar, so in the below analysis, SFSP or “summer feeding” will be used as an umbrella term to refer to both programs, except where the distinction is relevant. The potential eligibility and 2022 SFSP Site Locations Analysis uses SFSP site data from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which oversees SFSP at the federal level. At the state level, SFSP is administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE.)

In general, SFSP sites are located within census tracts in which at least 50% of resident children are at or below 185% of the federal poverty level and would therefore be eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches. Sites can become individually eligible if they are close enough to an individual school building that would qualify for the program or if a sponsor can prove that 50% or more of participating children who attend a site meet the income thresholds. For more information about how sites can become eligible for SFSP, please see [this chart from the Pennsylvania Department of Education](#).

In 2022, the last full summer for which data is available as of time of publishing, Lancaster County had 44 SFSP sites that were in operation at any point in the summer. On average, SFSP sites in Lancaster County were open for about 6.5 weeks, with some running for eleven weeks and some running for only two days. Most SFSP sites opened in June and ended in July or August.

Twenty-seven SFSP sites were sponsored by the Lancaster Recreation Commission, which was by far the largest sponsor. The next largest sponsor, with five sites, was the Boys and Girls Club of Lancaster. All sites operated under SFSP rather than SSO, and all were “open sites,” meaning that any child was eligible to receive a meal without needing to pre-register or be part of a specific activity program.

SFSP sites were not evenly distributed across the county. The vast majority of SFSP sites were located in the School District of Lancaster’s boundaries. Columbia School District had six, Manheim Township and Penn Manor school districts had three, and Manheim Central School District had one.

Density is a valuable consideration when assessing where SFSP sites could be successful, as the primary program design states that children must eat meals on-site in congregate settings, and transportation to and from a site may be a prohibitive barrier for children in rural areas. Waivers implemented in all child nutrition programs during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that non-congregate feeding, where meals can be picked up for offsite consumption, could be an effective way of overcoming this issue.

As of 2023, there is a new rule in place allowing for non-congregate sites in rural areas,<sup>24</sup> but it is only applicable in a relatively narrow set of circumstances.

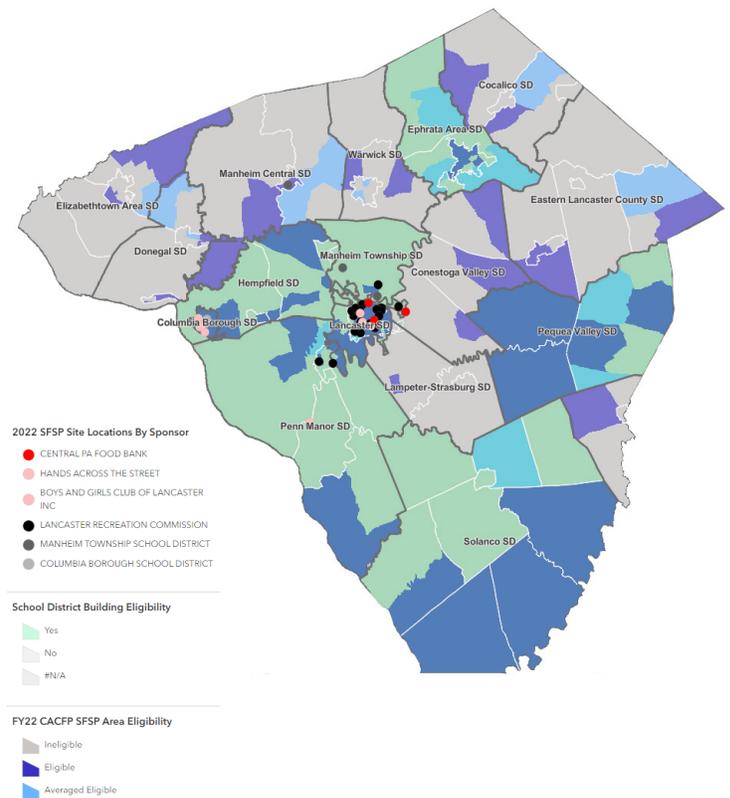
## PRIVATELY FUNDED SUMMER FOOD PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN

As mentioned above, not every area is eligible for SFSP, and even in eligible locations, a federally funded on-site meal program might not be what best serves the needs of the community. SFSP is a valuable program, but it is not the sole means of ensuring children receive the nutrition they need when schools are not open.

Results of a brief survey of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank’s Youth Programs partner agencies and programs show that several non-SFSP children’s programs do operate in the summer in Lancaster County and that a lack of SFSP sites in an area does not necessarily imply that children completely lack access to free food outside their homes when school is not in session.

Most agencies provided summer food by continuing their school-year service models, and some expanded the size of their food packages (for child grocery partners) or provided lunch kits specifically designed to replace school lunch. Several agencies that reported operating during summer served areas that lacked or were not eligible for SFSP sites, including Lititz, Lampeter, New Holland, Solanco, Ephrata, Elizabethtown, and Mountville.

The responding agencies that did not operate in the summer reported that they either faced funding and food sourcing constraints that did not allow them to operate year-round or were not open because their program was specifically associated with a school. A few partners reported that they were aware of programs external to the charitable food network, such as summer camps, that provided meals to kids in the summer. Programs like these can act as supports for kids in need even though food service is not their primary programmatic goal.



# UTILIZATION OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 3 Finding 1: Government-funded nutrition assistance programs, particularly SNAP, are many times larger than the charitable food system but are currently underutilized.**

Neighbors report that government programs are difficult to navigate and trust and people who visit pantries overall trust the food pantries more than government programs to help them.

**Recommendation: Pantries should work to promote SNAP, WIC, and participation in other government programs.**

Promotion could be as simple as talking about these programs in a positive light, having clear and visible information, and otherwise working to reduce stigma around these programs. Pantries with more capacity can help people sign up for and stay enrolled in social safety net programs. HFLC and its members can play a supporting and coordinating role in this process to increase participation in key government programs, **in collaboration with key stakeholders and government entities.**

**Section 3 Finding 2: SNAP participation is low in Lancaster County overall compared to the rest of Pennsylvania, and is low among food pantry visitors with SNAP participation at just 50%.**

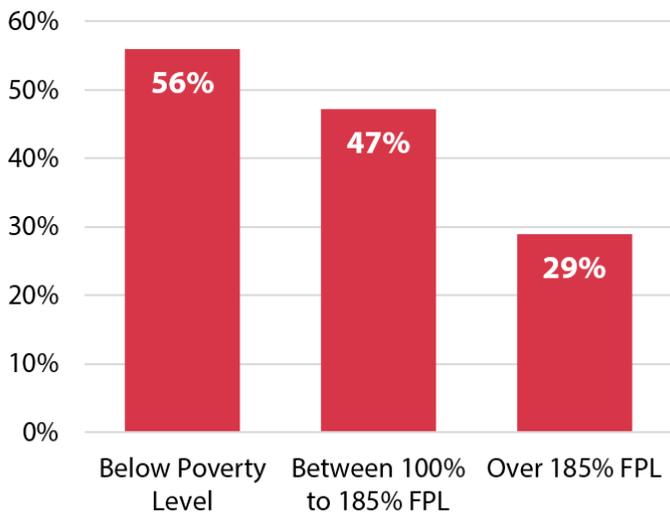
Further, just 56% of pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty line participate in SNAP. Around 90% of people who visit food pantries earn less than 185% FPL and are therefore likely eligible for SNAP or other government programs.

Nearly 20% of food pantry visitors have never applied for SNAP. Most people who have not applied for SNAP believe they are not eligible, but 75% of people who believe they are not eligible earn less than 185% FPL.

**Recommendation: Pantries and other key stakeholders should work to promote SNAP participation among people who visit food pantries, as pantries are a particularly well-targeted place to conduct outreach.**

Food pantries have an opportunity to increase SNAP participation among the people they serve through key partnerships with interested stakeholders and the government. HFLC could help develop and coordinate education and application assistance materials for pantries. Promising tactics to increase SNAP participation could include targeting specific individuals who are likely eligible, geotargeted advertising, and training pantries to assist in application development or promote SNAP materials, if they have the capacity.

**SNAP Participation Rate by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level**



# UTILIZATION OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS

## Section 3 Finding 3: WIC participation is low in Lancaster County and among likely eligible families who visit food pantries.

Lancaster County has lost more WIC participants than all other counties in Pennsylvania except Allegheny since December 2020, and participation remains 11% lower than December 2020 even as participation has recovered in the state overall. ZIP Codes 17602 and 17603 in Lancaster experienced the 2nd and 4th largest WIC participation drops in the state, and 17522 in Ephrata lost more than 100 WIC participants.

Focus group respondents indicate that WIC is very difficult to use and is often not worth it for the low level of benefits it provides. WIC can be an especially arduous program to stay on because benefits need to be recharged in person every few months, which often requires a day off work and bringing kids to appointments. Pennsylvania is one of just nine states to require in person recharging of benefits, and Pennsylvania's WIC participation has lagged as a result.

**Recommendation: Pantries should increase awareness of WIC and work to make it easier to utilize. Although the application process is more involved than other programs, innovative designs like WIC mobile clinics and locations can help meet people where they are to make it easier to sign up for and recharge benefits.**

Select food pantries could be great locations for additional outreach, particularly within the target ZIP Codes of 17602, 17603, and 17522.

State-level advocacy and discussions with the Governor's administration and Department of Health are critically important for the WIC program and for solutions in the long-term as many of the flexibilities required to make WIC easier to use are decisions made at the state-level. HFLC and its members could help coordinate specific advocacy efforts.

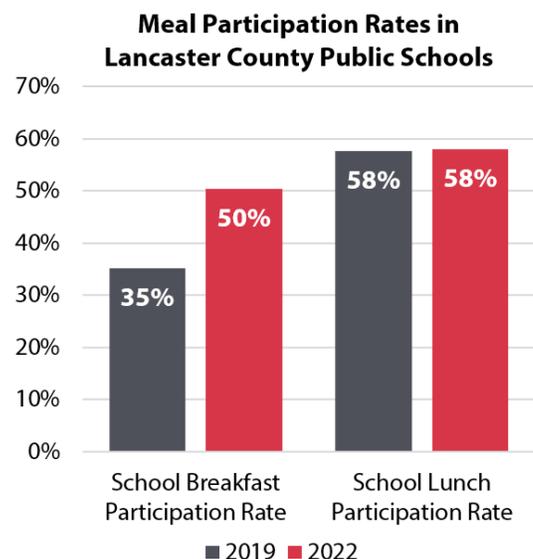
## Section 3 Finding 4: School meal participation is low in many high-poverty schools in most of Lancaster County and is especially low in high schools.

Breakfast participation lags even further behind school lunch participation, but the one-year free school breakfast program started in October 2022 was incredibly impactful, resulting in a 43% participation increase countywide.

**Recommendation: All schools, and especially the target schools identified in the NSLP/SBP analysis of this report, should work to implement strategies to increase participation in school meal programs.**

There are several evidence-based alternative service models that can help increase participation in breakfast in particular, including breakfast in the classroom for elementary schools and grab-and-go or second-chance breakfast in secondary schools.<sup>25</sup>

HFLC and its members should collaboratively advocate at the state level for a continuation of the free school breakfast program. The well-targeted universality of free school breakfast makes it a very well-designed policy, especially since children are 55% more likely to face food insecurity than adults.



# UTILIZATION OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 3 Finding 5: The universal free breakfast program offers a significant opportunity to increase participation in breakfast across the county while the end of universal free lunch, in place during the COVID-19 pandemic means that there are households who are most likely not aware of the need to apply for school meals.**

In addition, it is possible the school district infrastructure in many school districts to encourage parents and guardians to apply has atrophied, as it may not have been put to its full use in the pandemic period in which free meals were universal, regardless of application. The renewed universal school breakfast program will enable school to build upon progress achieved in 2019 and 2022.

**Recommendation: To help more children qualify for free/reduced meals post-pandemic, stakeholders should develop strategies to encourage and assist families and school districts with the lunch application process, and with increasing participation in universal school breakfast.**

Federal-level advocacy is an important tool as well, as universal free lunch may be most attainable at a federal level. Shorter-term and smaller scale federal rule changes, like the current USDA rule proposal to reduce the minimum Identified Student Percentage (ISP) needed to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) from 40% to 25% can have major impact for schools and kids, especially in combination with state-level initiatives.

**Section 3 Finding 6: SFSP is not currently utilized in certain densely populated and eligible areas of the county, including Ephrata, Mountville, Mount Joy, and Elizabethtown.**

A new rural non-congregate SFSP rule may make it possible for Solanco and Pequea Valley areas to increase access to SFSP. With that said, there are many food insecure children who live in areas that are ineligible for SFSP, and congregate meals are not always the right service model for every community.

**Recommendation: Key stakeholders should seek out potential SFSP sites or sponsors in these identified areas and the charitable food system should continue to invest both privately funded programs and SFSP sites so that children have access to summer meals.**

Stakeholders should consider the potential of rural non-congregate SFSP sites; in Lancaster County, Solanco School District and Pequea Valley School District are considered rural by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and contain eligible areas, so it could be possible to use this new rule to expand access to children living in eligible areas in these districts.

With the goal of ensuring that children and their families have access to the same amount and type of food during the summer as during the school year, the charitable food system should continue to invest in privately funded summer programs for children, especially in areas that are ineligible or too rural for SFSP to be maximally effective. Summer child grocery programs may be especially useful in areas like these, as they could have the capacity to provide food for parents as well as children.



## SECTION IV: INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES

### DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition largely resulting from economic insecurity and the related factors of household income, employment status, disability status, and race/ethnicity.<sup>26,27</sup> The prevalence of food insecurity is inversely related with household income, making poverty status and the ratio of income to the poverty level some of the strongest predictors of food insecurity status.<sup>28</sup>

Homeownership and housing insecurity are also strong predictors of household food insecurity,<sup>29</sup> and these underlying factors vary dramatically by race/ethnicity in Lancaster County, contributing to divergent food insecurity rates by race/ethnicity.

To better understand root causes of food insecurity and their relationship to food insecurity in Lancaster County, this section builds off the extensive secondary data analysis conducted in the Lancaster County Hunger Mapping Interim Report, with primary food pantry visitor survey data at pantries in Lancaster County. Overall, this analysis finds that along with historic marginalization, there are three main upstream and intersecting factors contributing to food insecurity in Lancaster County, including housing costs and evictions, financial exclusion, and low and irregular pay.

### HOUSING AND EVICTIONS

#### **The reality of eviction, foreclosure, and homelessness among pantry visitors in Lancaster County**

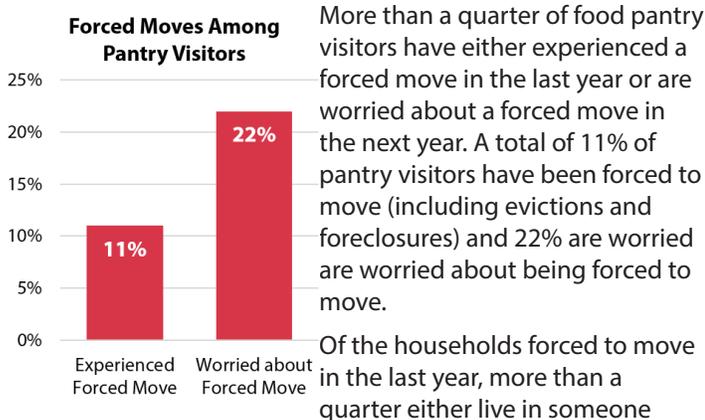
The food pantry visitor survey included two questions asking neighbors if they have experienced an eviction or foreclosure in the last 12 months or if they are worried about a forced move within the next 12 months. These questions opened multiple opportunities for neighbors to share insight into what was going on in their lives and what brought them to the food pantry on that particular day:

- A neighbor who only revealed that she was experiencing homeless and residing in a shelter was forced to return to the pantry with groceries she was not permitted to bring into her living arrangement due to shelter rules. She was in tears due to embarrassment. The pantry volunteers later indicated if she had said she was at the shelter they would have helped her pick things they know she can have and she could come more frequently.

- A survey completed in a pantry waiting area with a couple who had been living in Ephrata at the shelter but “it got too hectic,” and they had to leave. They are now sleeping in Musser Park. The woman barely spoke during the interaction.
- A woman who indicated her house is in foreclosure spoke with a CPFBR researcher and completed a survey. She said she comes to the pantry so she can use all their available household income toward keeping their family’s home.
- A 71-year-old woman waiting in line at a pantry explained she is currently renting a room from another family; however, she cannot stay there too much longer because that family needs to move other family members in. She is meeting with a case manager to determine her next steps. She mentioned living at the shelter in Columbia previously.
- A survey conducted in Spanish with a neighbor who shared she had been forced to leave her living situation three times and fears it could happen again in the next 12 months. Responding to the food insecurity questions, she was very direct about skipping meals so that her children could eat.
- [An observation from a CPFBR researcher after a day of surveys] Many people are reporting minimal income. Many people are reporting problems with landlords when asked the questions about housing security- fear of eviction, not wanting to ask [landlords] for things to be fixed because of threats to raise the rent in response to these requests. Families are doubled up or couch surfing as temporary living arrangements.

The food pantry agency survey results indicated housing needs are at the top of the list of non-food concerns for the people they serve. Certain pantries work closely with or are otherwise affiliated with housing services for their area while others are not connected, and it is unclear to what extent they have knowledge of available assistance to convey to neighbors. Pantries connected to housing services offer case management, transportation, and access to shelter programs. Many also offer single serving sized foods for individuals who are without a place to store or cook a larger amount of food.

The primary economic tradeoff made by households is money spent on housing or utilities instead of food. Among survey respondents across the county, 41% reported choosing between food and rent and 42% reported choosing between food and utilities. “The rent eats first” was a frequent refrain. Food pantry visitors are twice as likely to be renters compared to the overall population in Lancaster County (61% compared to 31% overall). CPF’s analysis of high food insecurity rates, poverty status, and housing burden status in the Lancaster County Hunger Mapping Interim Report demonstrate the interconnectedness of these economic factors which can make it very difficult, if not impossible, for individuals and families to meet their nutritional needs without assistance from food programs and the charitable food network.

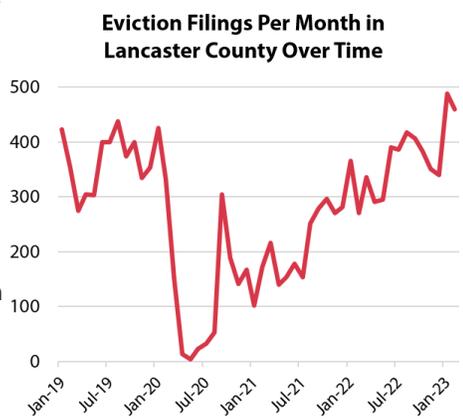


More than a quarter of food pantry visitors have either experienced a forced move in the last year or are worried about a forced move in the next year. A total of 11% of pantry visitors have been forced to move (including evictions and foreclosures) and 22% are worried about being forced to move. Of the households forced to move in the last year, more than a quarter either live in someone else’s place (14%) or live in a shelter (12%). People who have been evicted make up 45% of the food pantry visitor population who reported living at a shelter, making eviction a major cause of homelessness among the food pantry visitor population.

Additionally, 3% of food pantry visitors live in a shelter or motel, and 8% report living at someone else’s place. Renters are slightly more likely to be worried about being forced to move in the next year than homeowners, at 23% versus 18%.

Evictions in Lancaster County have followed national trends both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Evictions dropped to near zero when the eviction moratorium was in place and then spiked as protections waned and rental assistance gradually ran out. Pantry visitors express

maintaining stable housing is a major concern for their households: the data visualized in the graph above reflects that reality.<sup>30</sup>



The CPF Policy Research team conducted neighbor surveys at food pantries between October 2022 and February 2023. This was a period that followed more than two years of below average eviction filings. Unfortunately, eviction filings recently hit record highs, meaning that eviction and forced moves are likely to become an even bigger issue going forward.

## FINANCIAL SYSTEM ACCESS

One major barrier to economic mobility and financial well-being is lack of access to the mainstream financial system at both the individual and community level.<sup>31</sup> Nationally, low-income individuals are far less likely to have access to a bank account than higher-income individuals. In 2021, 4.5% of all households in the United States were unbanked and another 14.1% were underbanked.<sup>32</sup>

The FDIC defines a household as unbanked if they do not have access to a checking or savings account at a bank or credit union and classifies a household as underbanked if they have a checking or savings account but still utilize alternative financial services such as money orders, check-cashing services, and payday loans. These alternative financial services are more expensive than bank offerings, but they often have more initially predictable and upfront fees. This appearance of transparency can make them more attractive than traditional bank accounts, which charge large sums for overdraft fees and can require minimum balances.<sup>33</sup> Unbanked households spend on average 5% of their income on fees for alternative financial services,<sup>34</sup> which is a major drag on already limited resources.

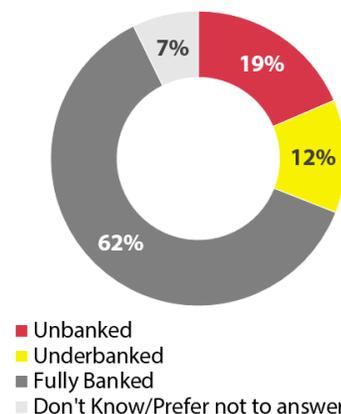
Unbanked and underbanked rates vary considerably by income, although they have decreased over time for all groups. A total of 19.8% of households who earn less than \$15,000 are unbanked, while 9.2% of individuals who earn between \$15,000 and \$30,000 are unbanked. This stands in stark contrast to unbanked rates for all other income levels, which stand at less than 4%.

There are major differences in financial access rates by race and ethnicity. Nationally, Black and Hispanic households are far more likely to be unbanked than are Asian and white households. A total of 11.3% of Black households and 9.3% of Hispanic households are unbanked, compared to 2.9% of Asian households and 2.1% of white households. In addition, Black and Hispanic households are more likely to be unbanked than white households at every single level of income. These disparities by race/ethnicity are the result of historic marginalization, financial exclusion, and predatory inclusion in asset markets.<sup>35,36</sup>

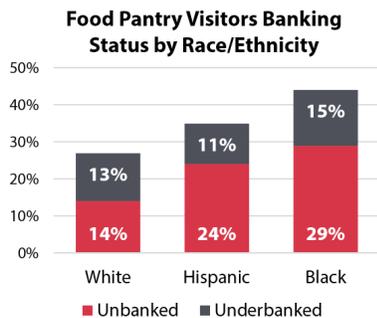
### Among food pantry visitor households in Lancaster County, 19% are unbanked and an additional 12% are underbanked.

Added together, this means that nearly a third of food pantry visitors do not have full access to mainstream financial markets. This data represents some of the first county-level data on financial exclusion for a specific population subset, like households who visit food pantries.

### Banking Access for Pantry Visitors

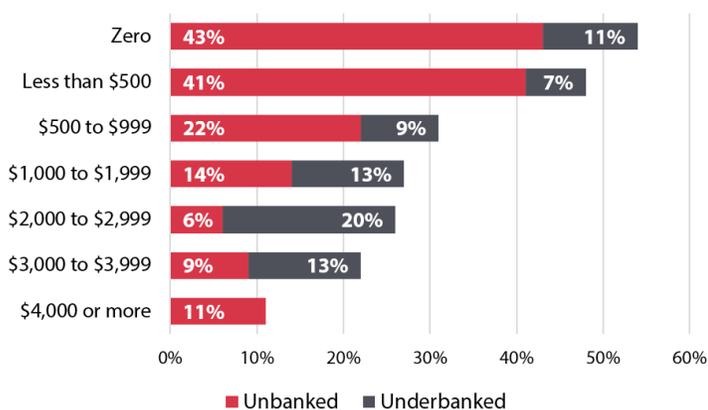


The survey data at pantries in Lancaster County follows the national trends by income and race/ethnicity. More than 40% of the lowest income households (those making less than \$500 a month) are unbanked, while higher income households are much less likely to be unbanked or underbanked. In addition, Black and Hispanic households are twice as likely to be unbanked compared to white households. Black households have an unbanked rate of 29% in the survey data, compared to 24% of Hispanic households and just 14% of white households.



Financial health has a major impact on food insecurity across a variety of dimensions due to its impact on economic security. A food security assessment in Alameda County, California found that the prevalence of subprime credit scores was strongly related to food insecurity at the ZIP Code level.<sup>37</sup> People with subprime credit and without access to mainstream financial markets pay more for goods and services than other households, making it truly more expensive to be poor.<sup>38</sup>

**Food Pantry Visitors Banking Status by Income**



Although the food pantry visitor survey did not ask the reasons why pantry visitors do not utilize the mainstream financial system, reasons cited in national surveys are informative, especially since the other food pantry visitor data in Lancaster County on financial access aligns with national trends. Top reasons for not having a bank account in national surveys include not enough money to meet minimum balance requirements, lack of trust in banks, and high or unpredictable fees.<sup>39</sup>

The charitable food system, including HFLC, should engage with local financial institutions to discuss the data and gauge interest in initiatives modeled after Bank On initiatives. These initiatives are designed to increase banking access for low-income households, with appropriate protections and straightforward fees.<sup>40</sup> Local Community Development Financial Institutions could also be good partners. For this initiative, it will likely be more effective for food pantries to approach and discuss these issues with financial institutions as a collective through HFLC.

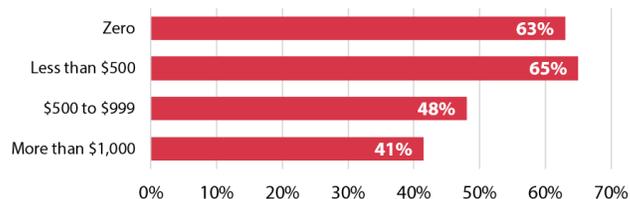
Financial inclusion literature and the FDIC, in research to better understand and increase banking access for unbanked households, cites the importance of trusted local partners in helping to reach unbanked individuals. This indicates that the charitable food system could play an effective role in increasing access to the mainstream financial system because pantries are trusted community institutions in Lancaster County. This points to the importance of ensuring financial offerings will work well for low-income households before promoting them at a pantry, both to protect food pantry visitors and to retain trust.

In addition, recent research cites the “importance of bankable moments” in increasing banking access.<sup>41</sup> Bank account access reached an all-time high in 2021, in part due to government stimulus checks prompting individuals to open a bank account.<sup>42</sup> Tax season and corresponding refunds represent a similar bankable moment, and the charitable food system could work to increase utilization of and partnership with the United Way’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, or VITA, program to both save food pantry visitors funds in the short term by avoiding use of for-profit tax providers, and to offer opening a bank account for refunds as part of a longer-term financial access strategy.

## INCOME GAPS

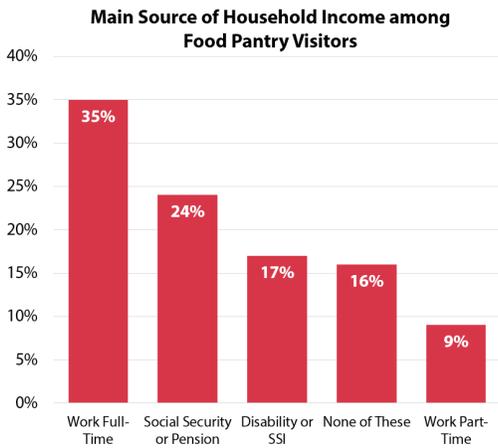
Household income was the strongest determinant of food insecurity status of any characteristic in the food pantry visitor survey data, making household income of utmost importance to the charitable food system. Nearly two-thirds of households who reported earning less than \$500 a month experience very low food insecurity. Half of all households who earn between \$500 and \$1,000 experience very low food security, compared to around 40% of all people at all other income levels.

**Very Low Food Security Rate by Monthly Income**



Overall, just 10% of food pantry visitor households earn less than \$500 per month, but they make up 26% of all households who experience very low food security. Pantry visitor households who earn less than \$1,000 a month make-up 29% of the total household population but 46% of households who experience very low food security. Similar patterns hold when adjusting income for household size. Over 50% of households in poverty experience very low food security compared to 28% of those who earn more than 200% FPL. Very low food security steadily declines as income increases.

More than 70% of pantry visitors reported that they are working full-time, are receiving Social Security, or are receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI or SSD), with the plurality of households who visit a food pantry working full time. This means that less than 30% of households are unemployed or underemployed. In fact, the 30% figure is very likely to be an overestimate because 5% of respondents did not wish to answer the income sources question.



Among the main reasons cited for not working in the last year, ill/disabled topped the list at 22%. Taking care of family was next at 21%, and no weeks not working and could not find work rounded out the top four at 16% and 17%, respectively. This data helps to dispel myths and stereotypes about the people who visit food pantries. Most working-age households are employed full-time, and the main reasons people cite for not being employed full time are disability status and taking care of family.

On the policy side, this means that work requirements in government programs among food insecurity individuals are more likely to hurt disabled individuals and household caregivers than they are to result in additional people finding and securing employment.

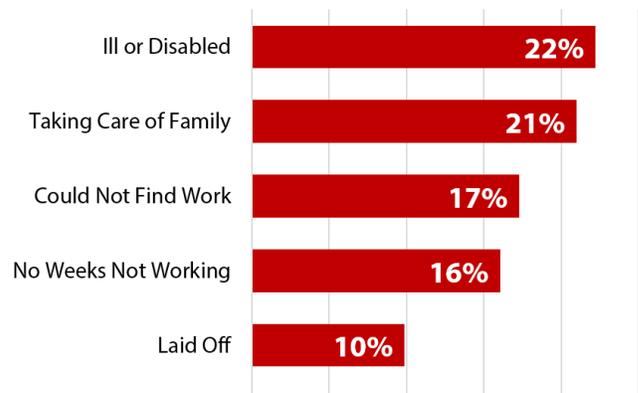
While more than half of all working-age, non-disabled households who visit food pantries work full time, they work for very low wages. A total of 47% of households who have a full-time worker who works every week earns less than \$24,000 a year. This equates to around \$11.50 an hour. A total of 16% of households with a full-time worker earn less than \$1,000 a month (\$12,000 annually). This is less than the minimum wage, indicating that many food pantry visitor households may earn minimum wage and that they likely face irregular and unpredictable schedules. Indeed, a third of working parents nationally receive their working schedules less than two weeks in advance.<sup>43</sup>

Follow-up conversations with food pantry visitors could explore whether unpredictable and irregular hours and schedules or low wages are the main obstacle facing food pantry visitor households who work full time. Extensive research literature shows that both low wages and unpredictable schedules are among the main causes of economic insecurity among low-income households.<sup>44</sup>

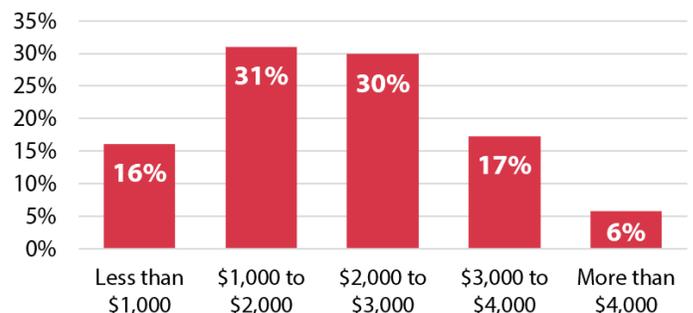
This data means that low and minimum wage issues impact people who visit pantries and that HFLC and its member food pantries have a role to play in advocating for family-sustaining wages and employment conditions. It is important to note that low wages are a systemic issue and are not isolated to households who visit food pantries. **Nearly a quarter of all Lancaster County households earn less than 185% of the federal poverty level and qualify for government funded food. This equates to over 100,000 Lancastrians (22.0%) who qualify for charitable food assistance.**



### Main Reasons Reported for Not Working



### Full-Time Workers by Monthly Income



## NON-FOOD SERVICES

In addition to being some of the lowest barrier social services in and of themselves, food pantries can serve as relatively low-barrier entry points to additional services. Many pantries recognize the households they serve may need things like diapers, clothing, toiletries, and other essential items that are costly and not covered by SNAP benefits and try to provide such non-food items when possible. Larger pantries also might operate or submit applications for programs intended to address neighbors' needs beyond food and essential items, such as housing and shelter programs, rent and utility bill assistance, English classes, life skills and financial literacy classes, transportation services, and internet access.

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***“It’s not just a food pantry. There are other things that happen here. It connects you with service to help you stand up on your own to feet again.”***

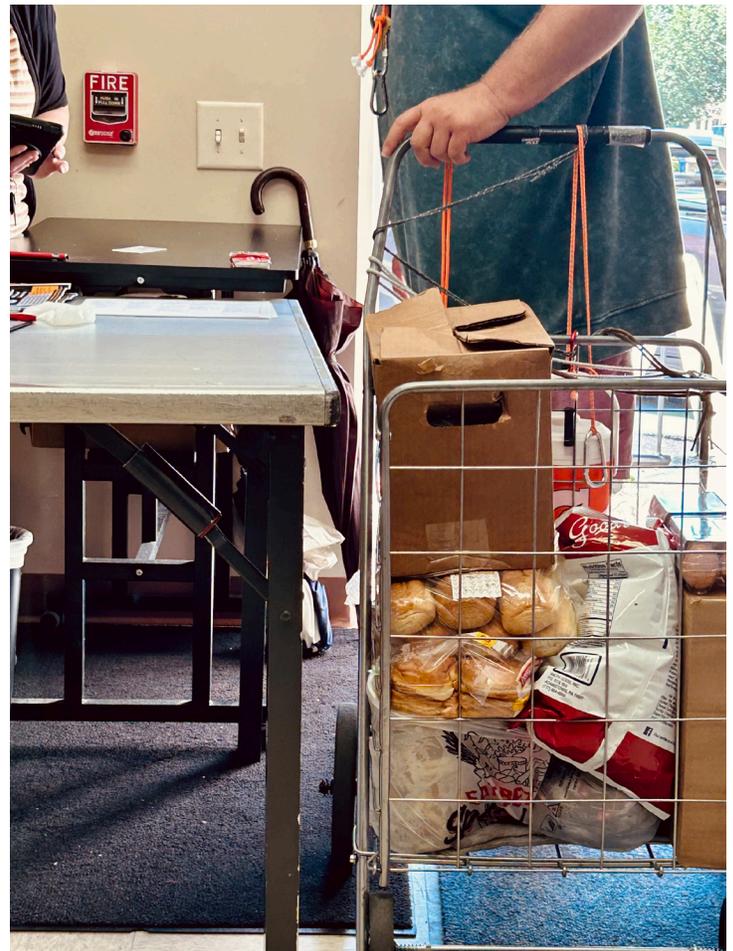
***- Lancaster County Focus Group Participant***

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Non-food services can bridge individuals to accessing food pantry services. One food pantry visitor reported in an interview learning about her current pantry’s food services through her participation in their emergency shelter and family program. “I was looking for help on the internet, then. I didn’t know that we had that [food pantry] in our community. I just (found) out when I was looking in the community.”

Some pantries require participation in select workshops and community events to receive regular services. Not all individuals can equally participate in programs like these due to time and transportation limitations. To center neighbor choice and provide a dignifying pantry experience, pantries should keep participation requirements at a minimum and allow individuals to seek additional programming on their own time and of their own volition.

Food pantries should continue to offer and promote non-food services to their pantry visitors and general community members. However, time and organizational capacity mean not every pantry can or should be everything to everyone. Pantries should collaborate to ensure they do not start separate but similar classes that have high start-up costs but smaller operating costs. Rather, pantries and HFLC should create and regularly update a list of available non-food services throughout the county for partners to easily access and make available at their food pantry. Partners can display this list at their food pantries and point to it when making referrals to neighbors in need.



## RETAIL FOOD SERVICES

Another upstream issue related to food insecurity is access to retail food; that is, whether neighbors can easily get to grocery stores that offer ample choices for affordable and nutritious foods. Research has found that low-income communities have far fewer accessible supermarkets and easier access to convenience stores than do middle or high-income neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup> These physical access differences have meaningful effects on shopping habits, as more SNAP benefits are spent at smaller stores in low-income areas. This is important because small stores generally have fewer fresh food options and higher prices than do supermarkets.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the impact of access on purchasing habits, studies have shown that residents of low-income areas with limited grocery access find ways to travel and spend most of their SNAP benefits at supermarkets.<sup>47</sup>

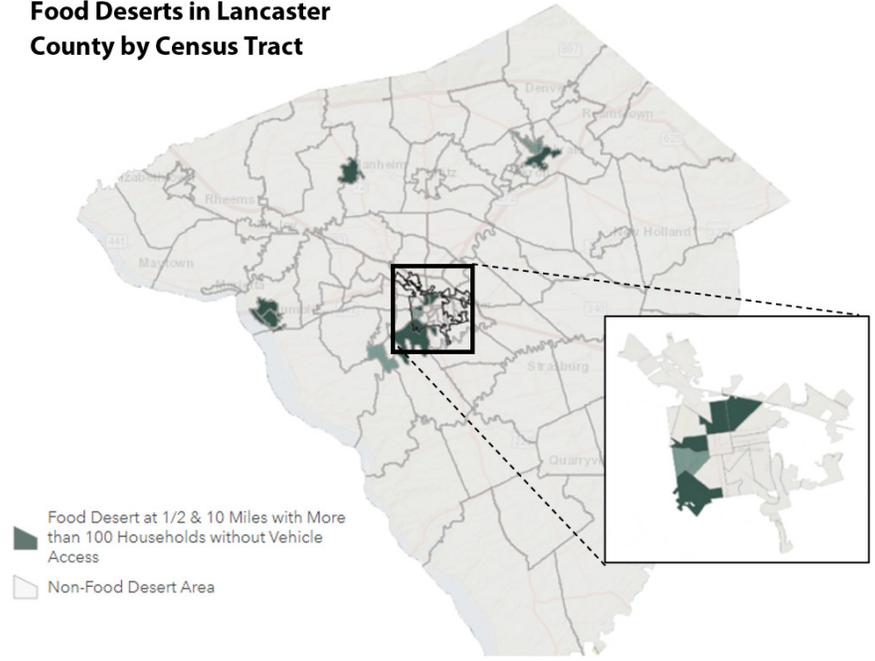
Additionally, SNAP participants do not spend the majority of their benefits at the retailer nearest to their house.<sup>48</sup> Recent research has revealed that income-based solutions to access issues have greater results than supply-side solutions like building new grocery stores.<sup>49</sup>

## FOOD DESERTS IN LANCASTER COUNTY

One prominent USDA measure defines food deserts as low-income census tracts in which at least 500 people, or 33% of the population, live more than one-half mile (in urban areas) or ten miles (in rural ones) from the nearest large grocer. USDA further classifies food deserts by vehicle access; those that have 100 or more households without vehicle access are the most severe.<sup>50</sup>

In Lancaster County, census tracts in Columbia, Manheim, Ephrata, and the southwestern and northern portions of Lancaster City are considered low-vehicle access food deserts under the above framework. Other areas in Millersville, Ephrata, and southwest Lancaster City are food deserts with high vehicle access. High vehicle access food deserts are shown in the map below in light green, while low vehicle access deserts are dark green. With these notable exceptions, there are few traditionally defined food deserts in Lancaster County.

**Food Deserts in Lancaster County by Census Tract**



## FOOD DESERT NETWORK ANALYSIS

The traditional USDA food desert definitions do not consider travel times for residents of those neighborhoods. USDA food desert measures are certainly informative, but it is also helpful to supplement that data with methods that more closely approximate experience in terms of actual access times to the supermarkets. Drive time analysis tries to represent the lived experiences of individuals more closely by using an ArcGIS network analysis method to examine how access times (specifically drive times) to various types of SNAP retailers vary by census tract across Lancaster County and how drive times for USDA food deserts compare to non-food deserts.

Results of a drive time analysis show they do not vary significantly for food desert census tracts compared to non-food desert tracts. In fact, average drive times for food deserts to the nearest supermarket are lower on average than drive times for non-food deserts. This finding is not simply a function of rural non-food desert census tracts elevating drive times for this group, as it remains even if only urban tracts are considered.

While drive times to convenience stores are lower than those to grocery stores in both food deserts and non-food deserts, it takes nearly twice as long for non-food desert residents to get to a convenience store. When looking at urban tracts only, the pattern remains. This is indicative of saturation of convenience stores in food desert areas, which are sometimes called food swamps.<sup>51</sup> This data may indicate that fresh food solutions in food deserts could include partnerships with local corner stores.

However, demand-side solutions are likely to be more effective, as median income is the main differentiator between food deserts and non-food deserts rather than drive time. This finding is supported by an emerging field of research.<sup>52,53</sup> These stark income differences between food desert and non-food desert areas indicate that there is a need for income-based solutions like Double-Up Food Bucks (DUFBS). DUFBS is a catch-all term for a group of programs that can be integrated with SNAP to match participant purchases of fresh produce dollar-for-dollar, up to a certain limit depending on the specific program.<sup>54</sup>

DUFBS programs have been proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption by increasing purchasing power<sup>55</sup> and to do so in a way that promotes choice and dignity for recipients, though some program designs, such as those that use cashless exchange methods at the point of sale rather than giving participants tokens or coupons,<sup>56</sup> appear to be more useful for neighbors than others. Studies have shown that DUFBS participation can have meaningful impact on food security status.<sup>57,58</sup>

Over half of all states formally implement a DUFBS program with the backing of the state government. Pennsylvania is not one of them, though there is a smaller, independent project run by The Food Trust that currently operates DUFBS at more than 90 farmers' markets in various locations across the Commonwealth and in a handful of supermarkets and corner stores in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas.<sup>59</sup>

A recent bill in the Pennsylvania legislature, S.B. 552, proposes the creation of a truly statewide DUFBS program. This program would be funded using both USDA grants and state dollars and administered by an eligible nonprofit in partnership with grocery stores, corner stores, and farmers' markets.

The proposed bill would preference retailers and farmers' markets who sell PA-grown produce, providing important support to local farmers.<sup>60</sup> In Hawai'i, a similar program generated \$2.10 for the local economy in every \$1 invested in produce discounts in 2020 and 2021.<sup>61</sup> Given the broad benefits DUFBS programs can have across the whole food system from producer to consumer, stakeholders such as HFLC should consider advocating for this bill and the program it would create to come to fruition.

# INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

The intersecting and upstream issues faced by food insecure individuals are systemic, including historic marginalization, housing insecurity, financial exclusion, and low pay. HFLC and its members should work to begin to address these problems through strategic partnerships and investments in underserved communities, as these issues have a direct impact on food insecurity.

## **Section 4 Finding 1: Housing insecurity and eviction rates are extremely high among food pantry visitor households.**

A total of 11% of surveyed households experienced a forced move in the last year, and 22% of households are worried about being forced to move in the coming year. Evictions have a major impact on food security status, especially for children, in both the short- and long-term.

Evictions in Lancaster County were lower than historical standards in 2022 but have now reached record highs in 2023. This means that problems related to evictions for pantry visitors will likely become more severe, especially as housing assistance funding from the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

## **Recommendation: Pantries should provide food offerings suitable for unstably or marginally housed individuals and explore implementing eviction prevention interventions for pantry visitors in partnership with other community stakeholders.**

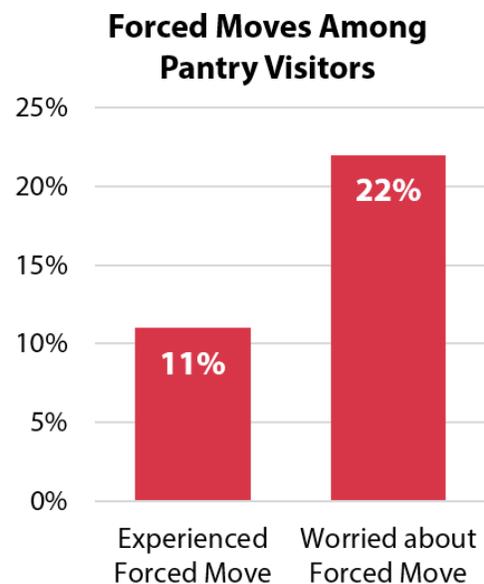
Pantries should be aware of the adversity facing unstably or marginally housed people. HFLC and interested pantries could collaborate with housing organizations to develop eviction prevention interventions for pantry visitors as well as promote existing programs.

HFLC could work with the Eviction Prevention Network to develop eviction prevention interventions that leverage the unique role of charitable food providers across Lancaster County. Several of the participating organizations overlap, so integration of already existing services may be key.

Potential interventions include creating marketing materials for use at food pantries across Lancaster County, implementing optional screening questions to identify people at risk of eviction and make referrals, and using pantries as locations to make financial counselors or support staff available in places across the county on designated days.

As this type of partnership would be among the first in the country, Hunger-Free Lancaster County and the Eviction Prevention Network should build in evaluation mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of this work and, if it proves to be successful, scale-up as funding allows.

In addition, food pantries should develop and make available modified food offerings for unhoused individuals. HFLC can support these efforts by developing resource guides for pantries on how to best serve unhoused individuals and modify food offerings appropriately.



# INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 4 Finding 2: The biggest economic tradeoffs food pantry visitors reported were choosing between paying for food and rent or mortgage and utilities, with over 40% each.**

Nearly 60% of respondents reported making at least one of those choices, and 27% reported making both choices. Food pantries also overwhelmingly reported that housing was the biggest challenge facing their pantry visitors.

**Recommendation: Pantries and HFLC could work to scale utility assistance activities already occurring at pantries across Lancaster County.**

More food pantries could help visitors with LIHEAP applications and other utility assistance programs. HFLC could help interested pantries start to process LIHEAP applications directly. In addition, HFLC and large pantries could help coordinate utility assistance with companies like PPL, as well as advocate for policies that increase the affordable housing stock.

**Section 4 Finding 3: Access to banking is severely limited among food pantry visitor households, with nearly a third of visitors unbanked or underbanked.**

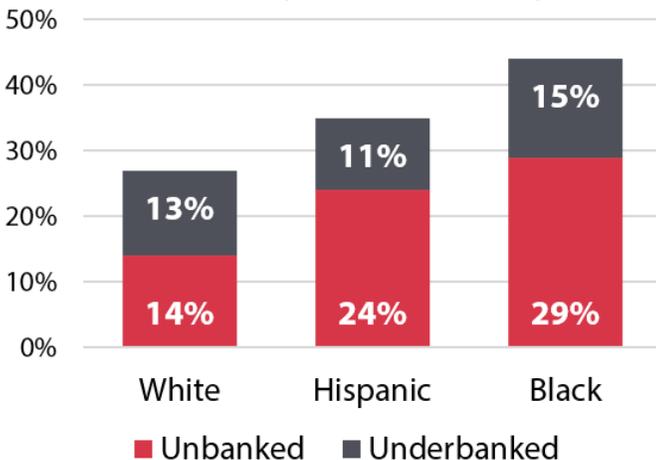
A total of 19% of households are unbanked (seven times greater than the overall rate of 2.6% in Pennsylvania), with no access to a checking or savings account, and an additional 12% are underbanked, with access to a bank but a reliance on alternative financial services. Lack of access to mainstream financial system dramatically impacts economic mobility opportunities through several mechanisms, including by reducing savings opportunities, increasing the expenses associated with cashing checks, and limiting opportunities to build credit.<sup>62</sup>

Banking access among food pantry visitors in Lancaster County follows national trends, as lower-income households are the least likely to have a bank account and Black and Hispanic households are much less likely than white or Asian households to have access to a bank account. In nationwide surveys, unbanked households report the biggest barriers to accessing the mainstream financial system are lack of trust, high or unpredictable fees, and minimum balance requirements.

**Recommendation: HFLC and other interested stakeholders should work with local financial institutions to ensure there are banking options suitable for low-income households and to help food pantries partner with key community organizations to utilize “bankable moments” to increase banking access.**

HFLC could engage with local financial institutions to gauge interest in initiatives like Bank On that can help create financial products that work for low-income households and connect unbanked populations to mainstream financial services. Financial inclusion literature points to the importance of trusted local community partners in helping to reach unbanked individuals, which situates the charitable food system uniquely well to help address this issue.

**Food Pantry Visitors Banking Status by Race/Ethnicity**



# INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition, recent studies point to the importance of “bankable moments,” which indicates that expanded charitable food system partnerships with the United Way’s VITA program could help increase banking access among food pantry visitors. Food pantries could be ideal locations for VITA volunteers and Hunger-Free Lancaster County could help coordinate this process, including making people aware of VITA before tax season. This partnership could help reduce the amount that food pantry users pay on tax services while also helping address financial access.

## **Section 4 Finding 4: Income is the strongest determinant of food insecurity status among food pantry visitors.**

Two-thirds of households who earn less than \$500 in a month experience very low food security. These households make up just 10% of food pantry visitor households but are 26% of households who experience very low food security.

## **Recommendation: Focusing additional food resources on the lowest income households could have an outsize impact on very low food security rates.**

This could mean making capacity investments in pantries that serve large numbers of very low-income households to enable them to serve individuals more frequently, ensuring availability and promoting awareness of community meals, or providing optional access to additional supportive services to these households.

**Over 70%**

of pantry visitor survey respondents either work full time, are on Social Security, or receive Disability/SSI.

## **Section 4 Finding 5: Most people who visit food pantries who can work do work.**

Over 70% of pantry visitor survey respondents reported that they either work full time, are on Social Security, or receive Disability/SSI. An additional 11% of individuals work part time or do contract or gig work. The three biggest reasons for not working for people who do not work or receive Social Security or Disability/SSI are being ill or disabled and being retired. Just 11% of people report either being laid off (5%) or not being able to find work (6%).

## **Recommendation: HFLC and food pantries should advocate against work requirements for SNAP, partner with workforce development organizations where appropriate for interested pantry visitors, and use the data to contradict stereotypes of food pantry visitors.**

HFLC and food pantries should use this data to dispel myths and stereotypes about pantry data and demonstrate the significant barriers people face in making ends meet, especially when they have a disability or are taking care of family.

HFLC and interested stakeholders should advocate against work requirements for SNAP and other safety net programs. More than half of all working-age households who do not work are either ill or disabled (22%) or taking care of family (30%). Work requirements will increase hardship and very low food security among these households and research has shown that they fail to meaningfully increase employment.<sup>63</sup>

While most pantry visitors who can work, do work, pantries should refer interested individuals to workforce development resources offered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania rather than start their own programs. HFLC could assist in developing a list of available resources.

# INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

**Section 4 Finding 6: More than half of working-age, non-disabled individuals work full time, but 46% of these individuals who report working every week in the last year earn less than \$24,000 a year (about \$11.50 per hour).**

One in six (16%) of these individuals earned less than \$12,000 a year. This is lower than the minimum wage, meaning they likely have inconsistent working hours, something that one in three working households with children faces in the United States,<sup>64</sup> or are engaged in temp or gig work.

Low wages are a systemic issue in Lancaster County. More than 22% of households earn less than 185% of the federal poverty line and therefore qualify for federally and state-funded charitable food.

**Recommendation: Low and minimum wage and irregular hours and schedules dramatically impact people who visit pantries. HFLC and its member organizations should advocate for family-sustaining wages, including with business partners.**

Other advocacy points that can reduce the instability of low wage work are an increase in the minimum wage and “fair work week” legislation that requires companies to give employees their schedules at least two weeks in advance. HFLC or its members could additionally facilitate additional engagement with pantry visitors about what issues are most impacting them as they navigate work to further inform advocacy and program design.

**Section 4 Finding 7: There are relatively few traditionally defined retail food deserts in Lancaster County, but low incomes negatively impact people’s ability to access fresh food.**

Network analysis reveals that these food deserts are primarily differentiated from other areas of Lancaster County by their low-income status rather than their geographic access to grocery stores. This is in line with recent literature which points to the importance of increasing purchasing power rather than supply-side solutions in addressing the issue of food deserts.

**Recommendation: HFLC and other interested stakeholders could work to pilot and scale-up a Double-Up Food Bucks program at grocery stores in Lancaster County, providing a match for every \$1 spent with SNAP benefits on fruits and vegetables. These programs have proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption while increasing choice and could also improve SNAP utilization in the county.**

DUFB programs have been adopted in over half of all states, but only local programs exist in Pennsylvania. HFLC could collaborate with local health systems and grocery stores to pilot a DUFB program in select areas of Lancaster County locally and advocate for implementation of a statewide program. Further, to address the issue of lack of vehicle access, especially in areas without nearby grocery stores or public transportation, HFLC should consider working with local retailers on piloting free grocery delivery programs to SNAP recipients. This type of partnership could both increase incentives for neighbors to sign up for SNAP and make fresh food more readily accessible in Lancaster County.

# CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

## CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This final Community Hunger Mapping report is the culmination of a year spent digging into existing research and data, engaging with community organizations, and most importantly, listening to and learning from the neighbors who are served by the charitable food network in Lancaster County. Every hour of work put into this report was spent with the aim of reflecting the true experiences of individuals who visit Lancaster's food pantries and providing an actionable, informative resource that can be used to work towards ending hunger for everyone who calls the county home.

While this report provides deep insights into Lancasterians' experiences with food insecurity and into the charitable food system's role in addressing this issue, implementation of recommendations and continual measures of progress are critical to ensuring that the findings are turned into meaningful changes and that improvements are visible to the neighbors served by the county's charitable food network.

Continual evaluation and research will help ensure that meaningful progress is made on implementation of the most important recommendations and update and adjust recommendations as the broader landscape changes. Indeed, the research efforts that resulted in this report helped to build out a neighbor-centered data infrastructure and culture in the charitable food system that will help provide some of the key ongoing metrics to assess food security in Lancaster County over time.

Members of Hunger-Free Lancaster County, food pantries, and other key stakeholders in the county's food system must lead the charge on executing the recommendations made in this report. It is not enough to merely listen to and try to understand the needs of our neighbors; we must rise to meet those needs.

This year has been dedicated to listening to the Lancaster County community through many different settings and methods. While our team has spent the last year collecting and analyzing data, more than anything, we have spent the last year listening to our neighbors. This report aims to reflect that.



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