LANCASTER COUNTY COMMUNITY HUNGER MAPPING:

IDENTIFYING LOCALIZED FOOD ACCESS GAPS AND INCREASING UNDERSTANDING OF INTERSECTING ISSUES FOR THE CHARITABLE FOOD SYSTEM

2023

Zachary Zook, Morgan Flood, Ashleigh Lucas, Dawn Watson, and Laura Whitaker Escobar
Policy Research, Central Pennsylvania Food Bank

Hunger-Free
LANCASTER COUNTY

CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA
FOOD BANK
No One Should Be Hungry

MEMBER OF
FEEDING
AMERICA

MEMBER OF
FEEDING
PENNSYLVANIA

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 50,000 people in Lancaster County face food insecurity, meaning that a staggering one in eleven Lancastrians 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 (CPFB), 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.

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 Lancastrians.

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

2020 Number Food Insecure

- More than 600
- 451 to 600
- 301 to 450
- 151 to 300
- 150 or Less
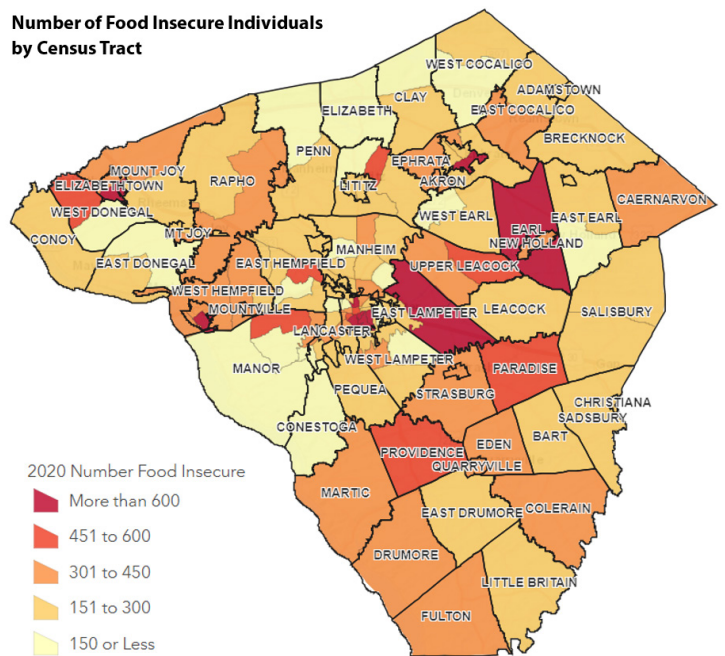
There are several overarching themes in the main findings and corresponding recommendations of this report that can provide a path forward to addressing food insecurity in Lancaster County.

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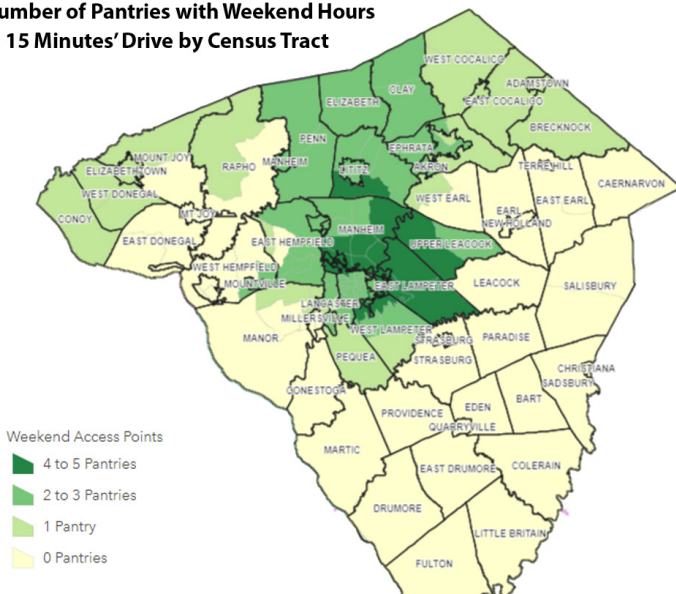
Household Food Security Status for Food Pantry Visitors
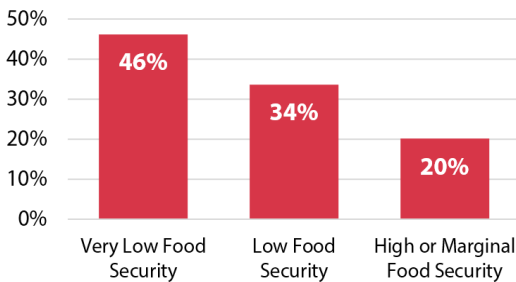
Recommendation: No one in Lancaster County should go hungry. The charitable food system and other policymakers and stakeholders should use the reduction of very low food security as a main measure of success and institute policies and programs that make progress towards this goal.

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

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.

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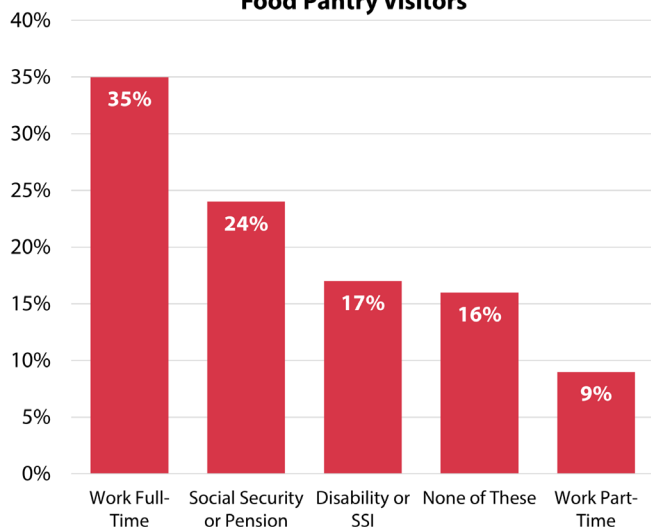Opportunities could include eviction prevention interventions, collaboration with local financial institutions to increase availability of financial products that work for low-income households, partnerships with the VITA program to utilize "bankable moments," and education and advocacy around issues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

Banking Access for Pantry Visitors

- 7%
- 12%
- 19%
- 62%
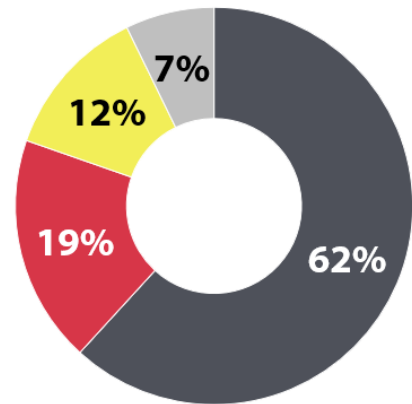
■ Fully Banked

■ Unbanked

■ Underbanked

■ Don't Know/Prefer not to answer

Main Source of Household Income among Food Pantry Visitors

Work Full-Time	35%
Social Security or Pension	24%
Disability or SSI	17%
None of These	16%
Work Part-Time	9%

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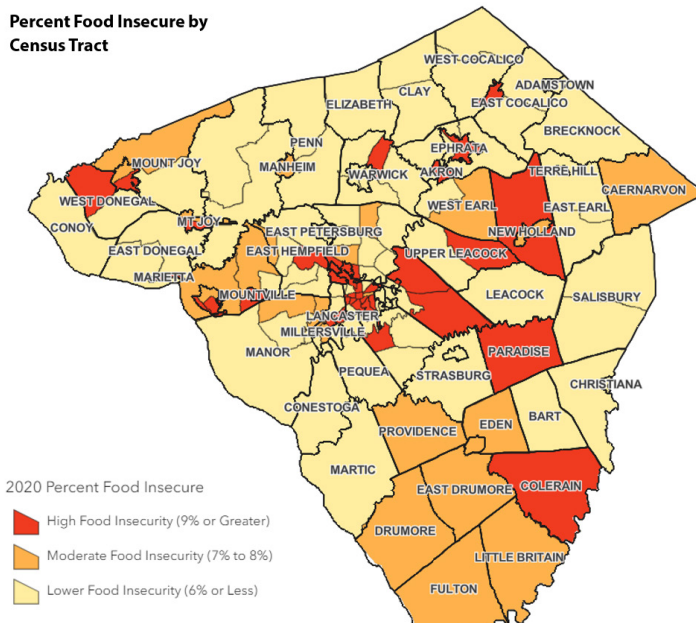
Section 1 Finding 2: Children are 55% more likely to be food insecure than adults, with a food insecurity rate of 11.9% compared to 7.7%.

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

2020 Percent Food Insecure

- High Food Insecurity (9% or Greater)
- Moderate Food Insecurity (7% to 8%)
- Lower Food Insecurity (6% or Less)

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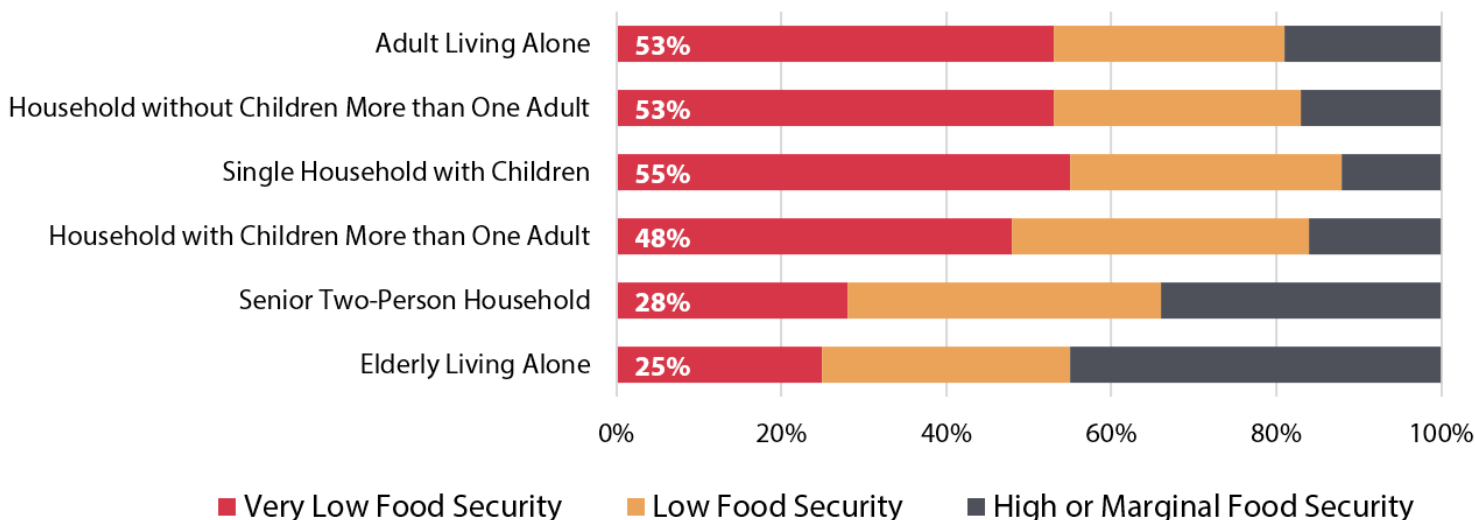
The charitable food system should continue to promote programs designed for seniors but also ensure resources are targeted for other populations, especially since non-senior households are the most likely to face very low food insecurity.

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

Household Type	Very Low Food Security
Adult Living Alone	53%
Household without Children More than One Adult	53%
Single Household with Children	55%
Household with Children More than One Adult	48%
Senior Two-Person Household	28%
Elderly Living Alone	25%

■ Very Low Food Security ■ Low Food Security ■ High or Marginal Food Security

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.

11

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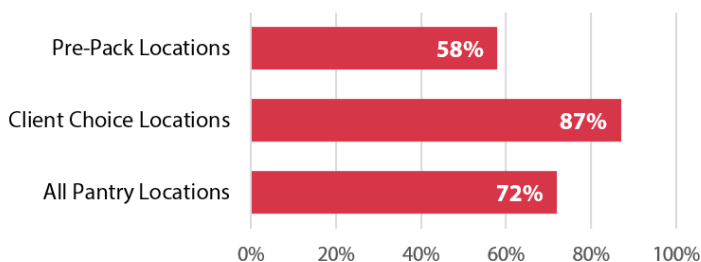
Section 2 Finding 9: Each interaction a neighbor has with a pantry staff member or volunteer matters and can impact pantry visitors' willingness or desire to come for food again.

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.

Pantry Policies for Households Above 185% FPL

Provide Donated Foods	Serve Once, but Ineligible Going Forward	Tell Them They are Ineligible	Serve Once, but Refer to Other Pantry	Not Sure/Have Never Had Happen
43%	22%	4%	4%	26%
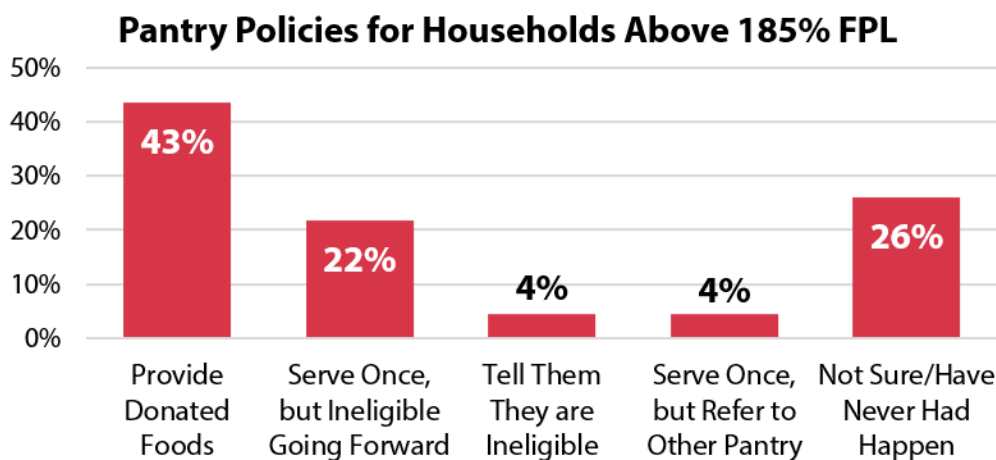
CHARITABLE FOOD ACCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

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. HFLC can help develop guidance for pantries in this regard.

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

Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Food Pantry

> 300
200
< 100
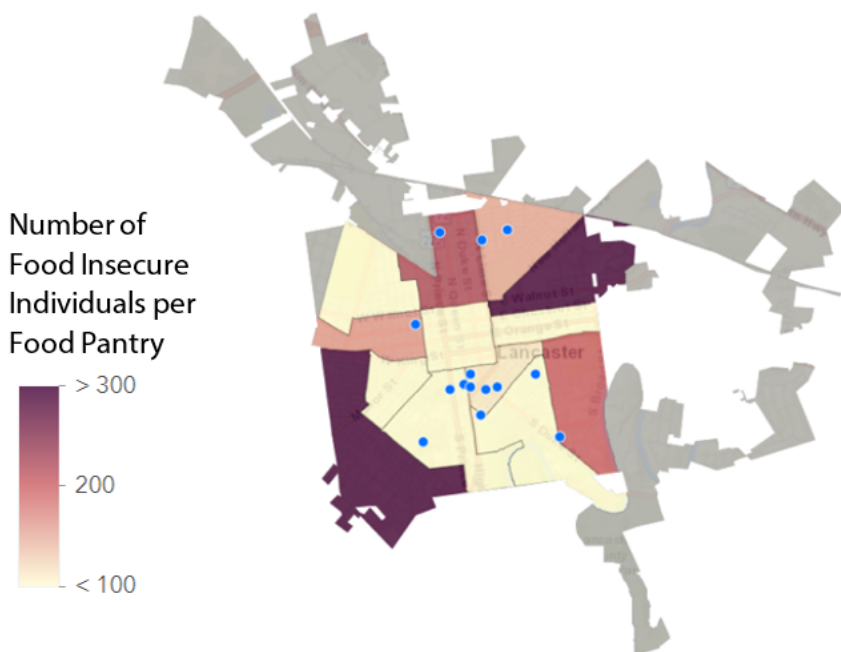
Percent of Pantries with Client Choice Offerings
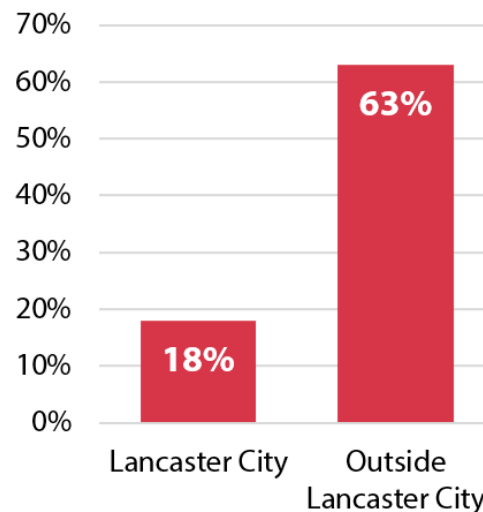
UTILIZATION OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS RECOMMENDATIONS

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.**

SNAP Participation Rate by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level

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.

16

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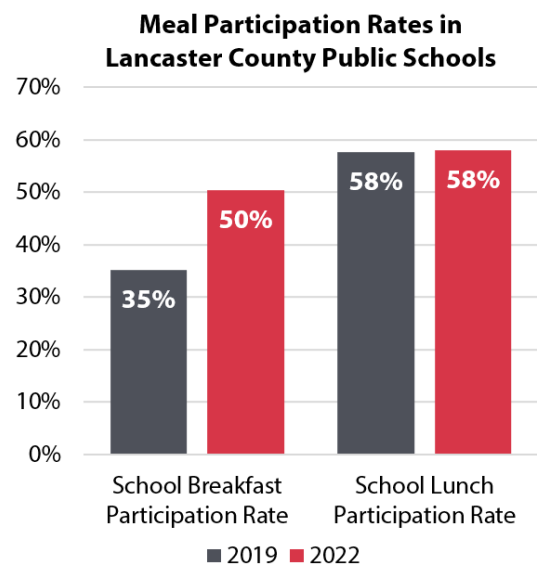
Section 3 Finding 4: School meal participation is low in many high-poverty schools in most of Lancaster County and is especially low in high schools.

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.[25]

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.

Meal Participation Rates in Lancaster County Public Schools

	School Breakfast Participation Rate	School Lunch Participation Rate
2019	35%	58%
2022	50%	58%

■ 2019 ■ 2022

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.

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.

Forced Moves Among Pantry Visitors
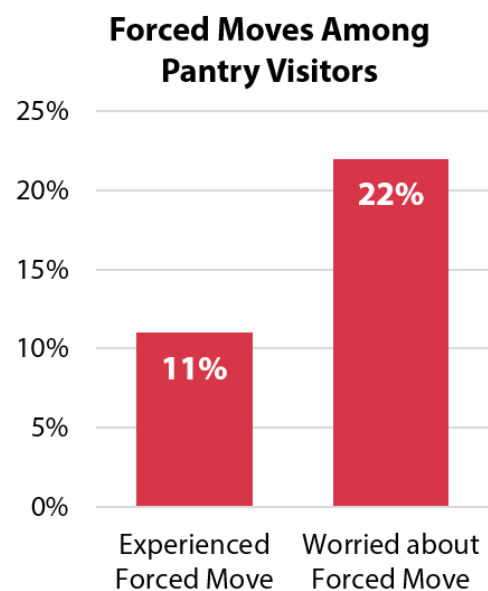
INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

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 occuring 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.

Food Pantry Visitors Banking Status by Race/Ethnicity

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.[62]

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.
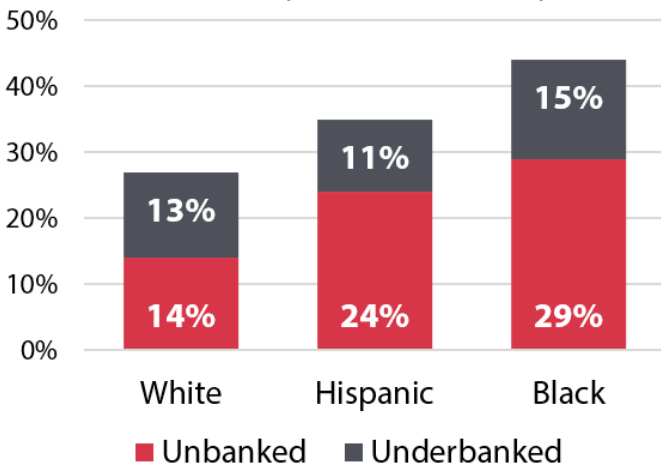
INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS

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 stereotpyes 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.[63]

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,[64] 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 by 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 Lancastrians' 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is made possible
by the generous support of:

THE
Steinman
FOUNDATION

HIGH
FOUNDATION

LANCASTER COUNTY
COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION