

SNYDER, UNION, & NORTHUMBERLAND 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

According to Feeding America's most recent Map the Meal Gap estimates, food insecurity rates across Snyder, Union, and Northumberland (SUN) counties stand at 12.5%; this is a 26% increase over 2021. All three counties saw a sizable increase in the rate and number of individuals who did not know where their next meal would come from – in total, more than 22,000 residents of the SUN region faced food insecurity in 2022, about 5,000 of whom had not been food insecure in 2021.

Food insecurity has uneven impact across and between smaller geographies, like municipalities and even neighborhoods, and it affects individuals differently based on demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, age, disability status, and household type as well. This report seeks to understand the distribution and experience of food insecurity across the SUN counties, as well as its drivers and root causes.

The thoughts of neighbors experiencing food insecurity, as collected via surveys conducted at food pantries and other community locations across the region as well as one-on-one interviews, are highlighted throughout this report, as are those of charitable food providers gathered via surveys and listening sessions. Alongside these qualitative analyses, quantitative sources and methods are also employed. This robust, mixed-methods approach allows the final report to provide a rigorous view of the charitable food system in the SUN region while maintaining an emphasis on the human experiences of the people it serves.

To support the work of creating change for food insecure neighbors in the central Susquehanna Valley, this report makes specific recommendations that can be implemented across the charitable food network to improve the experiences of pantry visitors in the short term and to end hunger in the longer term.

Substantive progress toward reducing or eliminating food insecurity cannot be made by one organization alone. Change will require intentional, sustained work by a wide variety of stakeholders, including leaders in the charitable food system, other social service organizations, health systems, local and state government, community members, and many more. Throughout this effort, the charitable food network supporting the SUN region will build upon its existing strengths while seeking continuous improvement that will help build a community where no one goes hungry.

The main research questions that this report seeks to address are as follows:

1. What is the extent of food insecurity in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties, and where in the region is it concentrated?
2. Who in the SUN region 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 throughout the SUN Counties and how does access vary in different areas of the region? How does access vary, if at all, by demographics?
4. What barriers do neighbors face in accessing charitable food services? Where do food distribution and access gaps exist in the SUN Counties? 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 region? What is the charitable food system's role in this space?
6. What other issues impact food insecurity in the SUN Region? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The food insecurity situation in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties (the SUN region) is layered and intersectional. The SUN region's food insecurity rate as of 2022 is 12.5%, comparable to neighboring counties and to Pennsylvania overall.

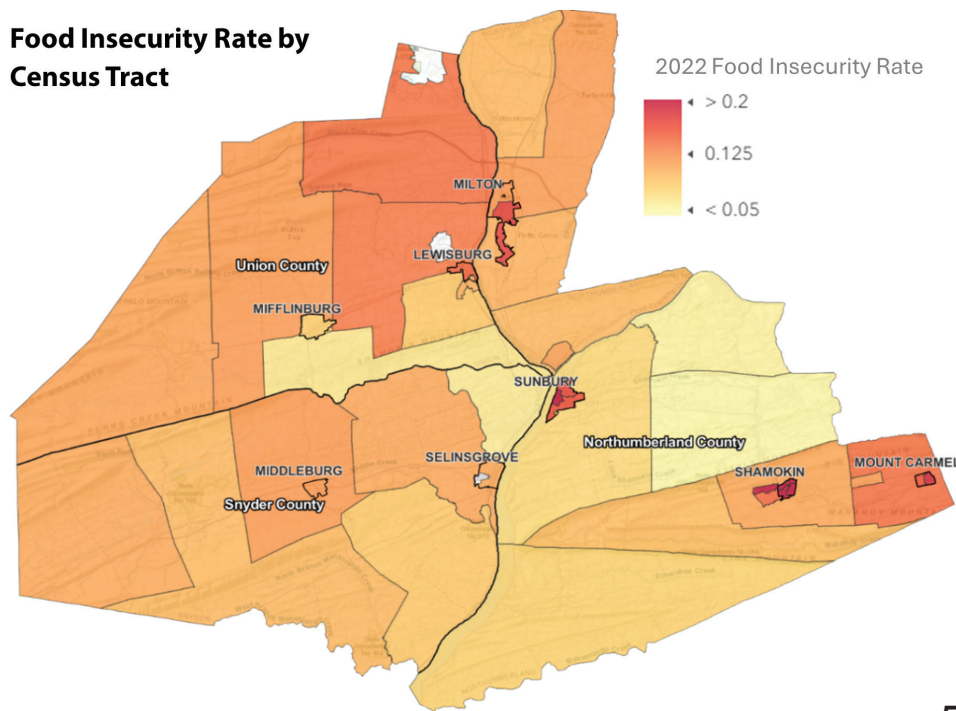
Food insecurity exists and is a significant issue in every municipality in the SUN region. But the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity varies based on demographic factors such as location, age, race and ethnicity, main source of income, and household type.

In Northumberland County, there are more than 12,000 food insecure individuals, which makes for an overall food insecurity rate of 13.3%. The population centers of Milton, Sunbury, and Shamokin have 26% of the total population but 37% of the food insecure population.

In Union County, there are 5,000 food insecure individuals. The county's overall food insecurity rate is 11.6%, with residents of the census tracts in and around Lewisburg experiencing the highest rates of food insecurity.

In Snyder County, there are more than 4,500 food insecure individuals and an overall food insecurity rate of 11.5%. The census tracts around Selinsgrove and Middleburg have the highest rate of food insecurity across the county.

Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract



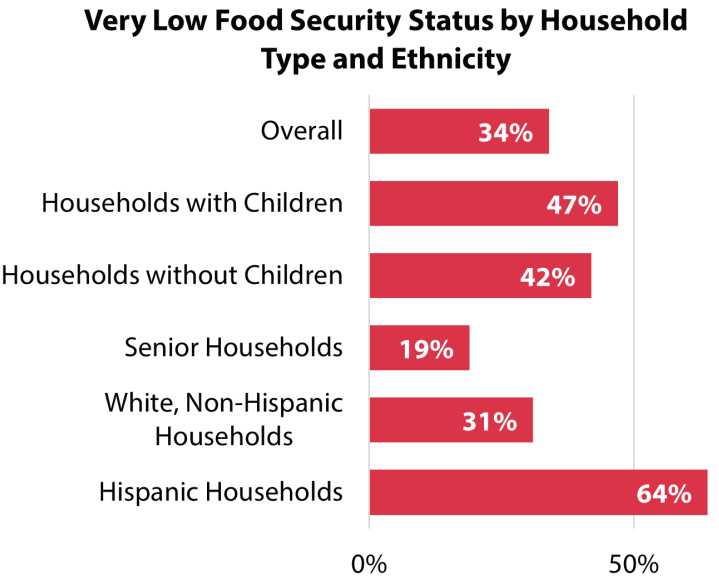
Children are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity in every county in the SUN region. Children are 41% more likely to experience food insecurity than adults, with a food insecurity rate of 16.3% compared to 11.6% for adults. This rate aligns with national data that shows food insecurity rates are higher for households with children than for any other household type.

Food insecurity increased 43% among children in 2022. Food insecurity increased by 26% for all individuals over 2021, but the impact was most acute among children. This differential increase is a direct result of the end of the expanded child tax credit.

Food insecurity rates for Hispanic households in the SUN region are among the highest in the state. Hispanic households have a food insecurity rate of 33% in Union County and 28% in Northumberland County. These rates are three times the food insecurity rates of white non-Hispanic households in the region.

These countywide patterns are reflected in very low food insecurity rates among pantry visitors. Very low food security status is the most severe form of food insecurity and an experience characterized by regular reductions in the quantity of food intake. **A third of food pantry visitors in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties experience very low food security, but households with children and Hispanic households are the most likely to experience very low food security at rates of 47% and 64% respectively.**

Working-age households without children face a very low food security rate of 42%, as opposed to 19% for senior households in the region. Reducing very low food security should be one of the primary aims of the charitable food system, policymakers, and other food security and anti-poverty stakeholders in the SUN region.

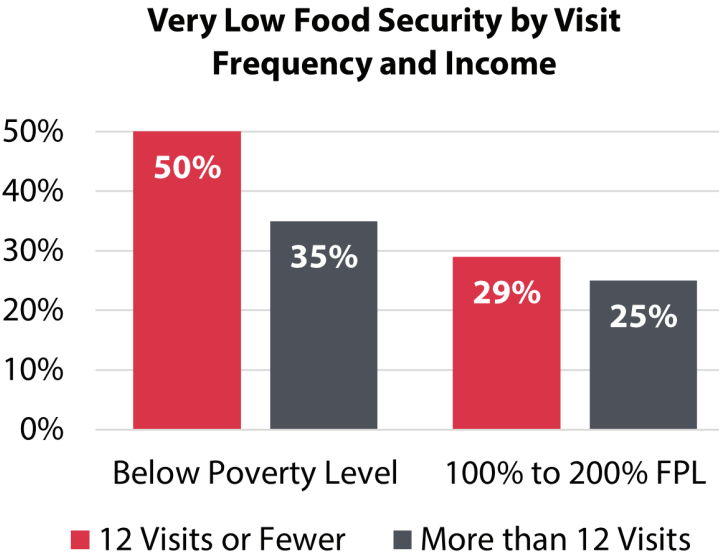


There are three main avenues through which the charitable food system and other stakeholders can work to reduce very low food security: increasing the accessibility of the charitable food system, increasing participation in key government programs, and addressing issues of household income and other major economic factors.

Avenue One – Charitable Food System
Key Findings:

Key Finding 1: The charitable food system in the SUN region has a measurable impact on very low food security among pantry visitors. Households with incomes below the federal poverty line who visited the charitable food system more than twelve times in the last year are 30% less likely to experience very low food security than households of the same income level who visited less than twelve times.

This finding provides evidence that the current work in the SUN region is having a major positive impact and demonstrates the importance of ensuring the charitable food system is as accessible as possible to all households.



Key Finding 2: The charitable food system in the SUN region has major strengths across a variety of dimensions, including its geographic reach, its widespread use of best practices such as choice models, and its food offerings, which are well-regarded by most households, among other strengths. In addition, the charitable food system is extremely well coordinated in the SUN region, with the Union-Snyder Hunger Coalition and the SUN Food Access Committee leading the way. This effective community coalition has strong leadership and active participation, enabling the coalition to work together to adapt, solve problems, and pursue opportunities.

Key Finding 3: Households with children, Hispanic households, and to a lesser extent, working-age households without children underutilize the charitable food system in the SUN region. This is due to several access barriers that impact these household types uniquely and disproportionately. These barriers to access include:

- 1. Limited evening and weekend access to food pantries across the SUN region.
- 2. Higher reported feelings of judgment when utilizing a food pantry.
- 3. Variable and uncertain language accessibility.
- 4. Significant wait times and long lines.

Limited Evening and Weekend Access

Households with children and Hispanic households are the most likely to have reported that pantry opening times represent a barrier to access, with more than 21% of households with children and 25% of Hispanic households reporting this barrier compared to 11% of all pantry visitor households. These households are the most likely to have reported working full time, and many expressed to CPFBR researchers that they have friends or family who would come but cannot make it to the food pantry in time because of work.

The charitable food system in the SUN region should work to strategically expand weekend and evening pantry access. Currently, just 70% of food pantry visitors have access to evening distribution and 58% have access to a weekend distribution, with most of these distributions occurring once or twice per month.

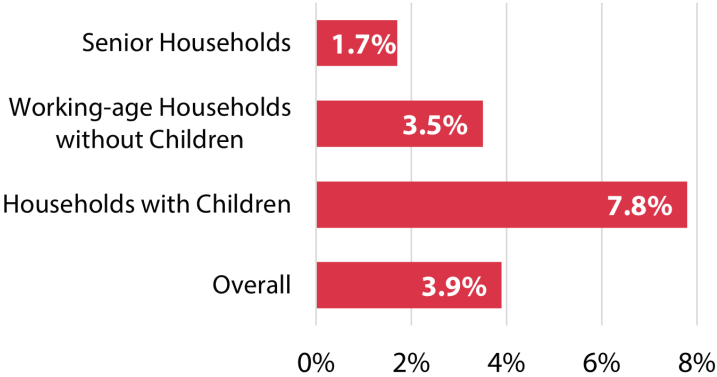
Higher Reported Feelings of Judgment for Households with Children and Hispanic Households

While reported experiences of judgment are relatively low overall across the SUN region, households with children and Hispanic households are twice as likely to have indicated feeling judged (8%) as working-age households without children and white, non-Hispanic households (4% each), and four times as likely as senior households (2%).

It is critically important for the charitable food system and pantries to institute policies and training programs that promote positive interactions between pantry visitors and staff or volunteers.

Every single interaction matters, and the charitable food system should place specific emphasis on ensuring households with children and Hispanic households feel welcome at all times. These are the households that experience the highest rates of very low food security, and families told CPFBR researchers they have felt hesitant to come back, even if they need additional food resources due to negative treatment.

Percent of Respondents Reporting Feeling Judged by Household Type in SUN Counties

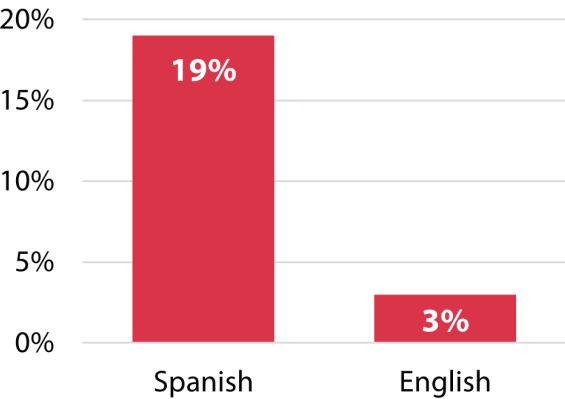


Variable and Uncertain Language Accessibility

Spanish-speaking households are by far the most likely to report feelings of judgment, with 19% of food pantry visitors who took the survey in Spanish reporting judgment compared to 3% of people who took the pantry survey in English. These negative experiences are due in large part to unpleasant interactions that occur when pantry directions or policies are not available in Spanish and when there are no Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers who can bridge the language barrier.

Pantry policies and procedures should be simple and translated into Spanish. The charitable food system should prioritize recruitment of Spanish-speaking volunteers as well. Staff and volunteers should give grace to all households who do not understand pantry policies rather than respond harshly, as policies can be confusing at times and differ from location to location.

Reported Feelings of Judgment by Survey Language



Significant Wait Times and Long Lines

Wait times in the SUN region are elevated, with more than 20% of pantry visitors having said that they wait longer than an hour to receive food at a pantry. These wait times and long lines can be discouraging for households with children as they may have less time to wait compared to other household types, and it can be more difficult to wait longer times with children.

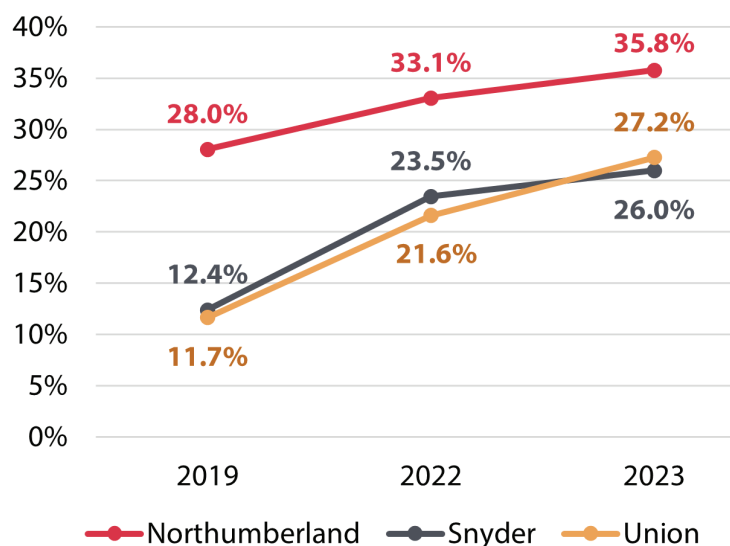
The charitable food system should experiment with a variety of ways to reduce wait times and long lines including opening more frequently, especially on weekends and evenings. While it can be difficult given capacity constraints, pantries should work to ensure food offerings are as similar as possible at the beginning and end of distributions.

Avenue Two – Increasing Participation in Key Government Programs

Key Finding 1: There is room for growth in participation in government programs specifically targeted towards children, such as school meals, WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) and SFSP (Summer Food Service Program). These programs are incredibly well-targeted towards the demographic that faces the highest rates of food insecurity in the SUN counties.

- All counties run behind the statewide average in school breakfast participation. There have been some major positive gains since the state universal school breakfast program, but breakfast participation and use of alternative breakfast models is low across schools in the SUN region.

Average Daily School Breakfast Participation Rate by County 2019-2023



- There are major opportunities to increase WIC participation in all counties, and specifically in ZIP Codes 17801 in Sunbury and 17872 in Shamokin. While promoting participation in this program is key, stakeholders should continue to advocate for reduced administrative requirements to make WIC more accessible.
- The entirety of the SUN region is classified as rural by USDA, so if a census tract is also area eligible for SFSP, it has the potential to host non-congregate meal sites. Where appropriate, the charitable food system should seek out potential SFSP sites or sponsors in eligible gap areas, but it should also invest in privately funded summer food programming for children in ineligible areas.

Key Finding 2: SNAP participation is robust among food pantry visitors in the SUN counties, with 57% of all food pantry visitors participating, including 73% of food pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty level. The biggest opportunities to increase SNAP participation exist among senior households in the SUN region and in Snyder County overall, which has experienced a 14% drop in SNAP participation in the last 10 years.

Avenue Three: Household Income and Other Key Economic Factors

Overall, this report finds several major upstream issues that contribute to food insecurity in the SUN counties, including limited income and low wages, disability status, housing insecurity, transportation, and health conditions.

Key Finding 1: Unemployment status is an incredibly small contributor to overall demand for charitable food services in the SUN counties. Nearly 90% of food pantry visitors either work full time (20%), receive Disability or SSI (20%), or receive Social Security or a pension (47%).

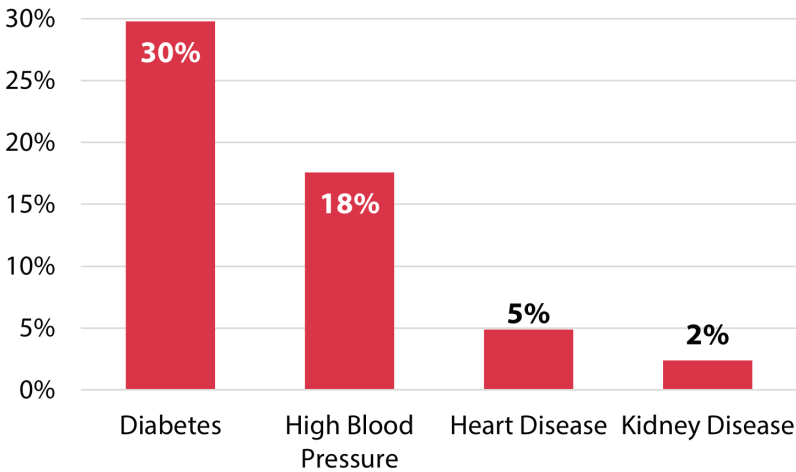
- Instead, inadequate fixed benefit amounts for Social Security or pension beneficiaries, and especially for SSDI and SSI (Disability) recipients, are major reasons that senior households, households with disabled members, and households with children struggle to make ends meet.
- The main barriers to work among working age households are disability, regardless of if the household is receiving SSI or SSDI or not, and taking care of family (especially for households with children).
- Most households with children work full or part time, but 44% of working households with children who work full time earn less than \$24,000 a year. 45% have incomes below the federal poverty line.

Key Finding 2: Housing costs, including utilities and rent or mortgage, are the primary economic tradeoff reported by food pantry visitors in the SUN region.

More than one in three pantry visitors reported choosing between utilities or food in the last year, while more than one in five indicated choosing between food and rent or mortgage. The charitable food system should continue to scale utility and housing assistance activities, as pantries represent a well-targeted location to promote these resources.

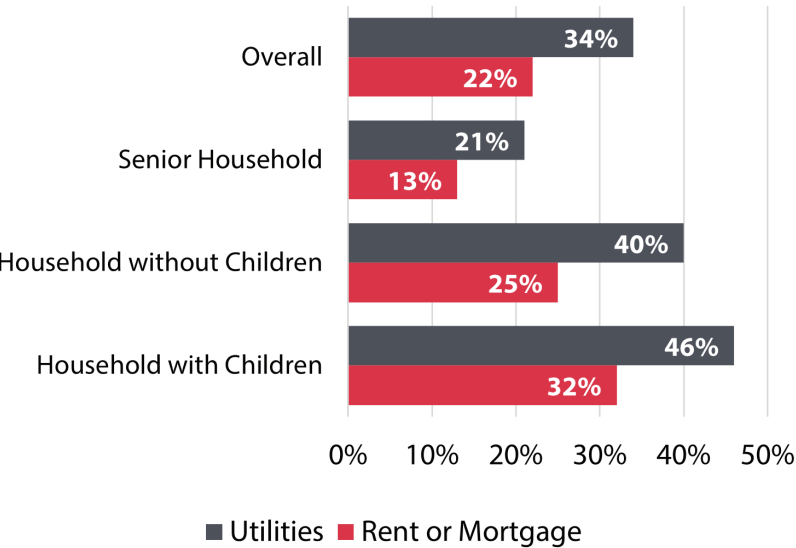
Key Finding 3: Chronic health conditions impact more than half of food pantry visitors in the SUN region. Lack of adequate money for food can make it difficult for neighbors to follow condition-specific diets, which can worsen health conditions. In turn, chronic health conditions can make it difficult for pantry visitors to work or access the services they need.

Prevalence of Specific Health Conditions among Pantry Visitor Households



The charitable food system should work with health providers to address the high level of chronic diseases faced, including through increasing programmatic partnerships and connections, and even addressing food insecurity as a social determinant of health through Medicaid 1115 waivers and other emerging opportunities.

Percentage of Households who Report Choosing Between Food and Utilities or Rent/Mortgage



Households with children reported slightly higher rates of having to choose between food and medicine or medical care, at 17% compared to 14% and 15% each for senior households and households without children.

Addressing the Avenues through Unique Roles in the Social Safety Net:

The charitable food system is one of the lowest-barrier social service access points. When people need help, they often turn to the charitable food system first. In addition, food pantries and the organizations that run them are often trusted community institutions. Together, these attributes provide a unique position for the charitable food system to work to reduce very low food security through these three avenues of increasing access to charitable food (Section 2), increasing government program participation (Section 3), and addressing underlying economic factors (Section 4). There are significant opportunities for partnerships and involvement from all stakeholders and policymakers in the food security and anti-poverty space to work together to reduce food insecurity in the SUN region in the long-term.

“With the worry that I need to save more for food, it’s just a great help. If they don’t call me for work, then I know I will be okay because they are helping me not need to buy food.”
–Interview Participant



METHODS

This final report is the outcome of a robust mixed-methods research endeavor, focused on rigorous quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The report emphasizes the voices and experiences of neighbors who visit food pantries in the SUN region, as well as the input of community leaders and food pantry providers. Contributions included in this report are deidentified to the extent possible to maintain the privacy of participants. Each method of data collection is described in turn below.

SECONDARY ANALYSIS

This report's secondary analysis draws upon data from a variety of different sources including the American Community Survey 2017-2021 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 for drive and walk times, and methodology used to identify target schools for child nutrition outreach is provided in the technical appendix.

Section 1 discusses food insecurity rates and numbers across the SUN region using 2022 food insecurity data published by Feeding America in May 2024. However, throughout the rest of the report, food insecure numbers are calculated using 2020 estimates as the 2022 data publication date was too late to change all underlying complicated analyses. The 2020 food insecurity data at the sub-county level approximates 2022 food insecurity data. Although 2020 food insecurity rates are systematically lower, differences between census tracts are relatively consistent.

NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

In Fall 2023, CPFB researchers conducted surveys at eight geographically and demographically representative food pantries across the SUN Region. A total of 410 surveys were completed across eight different pantry locations. Food pantry visitors were provided various options for survey completion: take the survey at the pantry on a CPFB-provided device, have the survey read to them by a CPFB researcher, or scan a QR code on a postcard that enabled them to complete the survey on their own device at their convenience. Surveys were available in both English and Spanish and were designed to take 10 minutes on average. \$10 gift cards for a variety of local grocery stores were provided to each participant. Survey results were cleaned for potential duplicate or erroneous entries, and the sample size needed to achieve a 90% confidence interval and 10% margin of error was achieved and exceeded at all pantry locations.

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. CPFB researchers developed a flexible interview guide and conducted all 10 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.

NON-FOOD PANTRY NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at various community locations to determine why some potentially food insecure individuals do not currently visit a food pantry. The surveys were anonymous and included four questions, including two food security screening questions. 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. The non-food pantry survey results reflect responses from 44 total participants from various libraries across Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties.

PARTNER LISTENING SESSIONS

CPFB agency partners from Snyder, Union, and Northumberland were invited to attend listening sessions in October and November 2023 to discuss strengths and challenges at the pantry level. The discussion-style session 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, and challenges related to distribution. The CPFB research team held two listening sessions in two different geographically central areas to make it easier for all partners to attend. Seventeen individuals participated in the listening sessions, representing 13 different agencies.

"My neighbor from downstairs invited me to go [to my current food pantry] with him. He is the one who gives me rides for work and had used the pantry before. He said if you like, when I go I can take you."

–Interview Participant

PARTNER SURVEYS

The CPFB Policy Research team distributed pantry surveys to CPFB agency partners who operate pantries that do not limit participation by age or military status across the SUN region. The surveys asked questions regarding distribution type and frequency, operating hours, policies for food pantry visitors, other services offered, and pantry capacity.

COUNTY LEAD AGENCY INTERVIEWS

CPFB researchers conducted one-on-one partner interviews with lead agency organizations, representing each county, to discuss strengths and challenges of meeting needs in their communities. Discussion topics included food pantry and community strengths, sourcing and logistics, challenges related to access, and opportunities for advocacy and collaboration.

PARTNER DATA SHARING AND SERVICE INSIGHTS

To develop the census tract level food pantry access gap map, this report utilized electronic neighbor intake and pantry service data from the 14 pantries in the SUN counties that use Service Insights on MealConnect, a software platform developed by Feeding America. These partners are among the largest pantries in the region and comprise a sizable majority of the food pantries who report collecting electronic data. Information about the methodology used in the gap analysis is in the technical appendix.



410 Neighbor Surveys
at 8 pantry locations



10 One-on-one Neighbor Interviews



44 Non-food Pantry Surveys



13 Partner Listening Session Participants
at 2 locations across the region



14 Pantries Sharing Anonymous Service Data



20 Partner Surveys

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the dedication and thoughtfulness of the SUN Region Community Hunger Mapping Consultative Group, whose members included Holden Midkiff of Crossroad Farms, Kristin Fleck and Greg Fleck of Fleck & Friends Fresh Express, Michael Bobb of Middlecreek Area Community Center, Clare Sammels and Lynn Pierson of Bucknell University, Stacey Picuch of Bucknell University/formerly of the Susquehanna Valley United Way, Tara Davis, Tracy Haas-Ungard, and Kelsey Cantor of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, Nicole Peterson, Rachel Herman, and Sue Auman of Union-Snyder Community Action Agency, and Megan Bair and Stacie Snyder of Central Susquehanna Opportunities, Inc.

Every neighbor who took the time to share their thoughts with us, whether that was through the Feeding America Client Survey, phone interviews, or the non-pantry location surveys, provided priceless insight into the reality of their lives and the true experience of food insecurity. Their words are the most important ones in this entire document. Many thanks to all those who were kind enough to speak with us.

Many thanks also to the food pantry coordinators of Union, Snyder, and Northumberland counties, without whom the charitable food network would not function. Similarly, without their flexibility around surveys so we could meet our neighbors, their feedback via the pantry surveys and listening sessions, and most importantly their dedication to the individuals and families they serve, this report would not have been complete.

Special thanks to Central Pennsylvania Food Bank staff outside the Policy Research team, including Tara Davis, Pam Hicks, Kavrina “Red” Kelly, and Jeremy Pearson, as well as Nicole Peterson and Rachel Herman of Union-Snyder Community Action Agency and Megan Bair, Stacie Snyder, Sandy Winhofer, and Taylor Kilmer of Central Susquehanna Opportunities, Inc. for assisting in survey administration. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who took time out of their busy schedules and in some cases braved inclement weather to help us connect with our neighbors.

Additional thanks to Union-Snyder Community Action Agency and Central Susquehanna Opportunities, Inc. for acting as conveners, connectors, and all-around invaluable resources both for the CPFEB Policy Research team and for residents of the central Susquehanna Valley. We truly are better together.

