# DAUPHIN COUNTY COMMUNITY HUNGER MAPPING:

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

## 2025

Zachary Zook, Morgan Flood, Ashleigh Lucas, Dawn Watson, Lo Whitaker Escobar, and Evan Armstrong

Impact and Policy Research, Central Pennsylvania Food Bank

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## INTRODUCTION

More than 32,000 residents of Dauphin County face food insecurity, as of Feeding America's most recent Map the Meal Gap estimates. Of these food insecure residents, two in five are children, and one in three lives within Harrisburg city limits. The burden of not knowing from where the next meal will come weighs upon every neighborhood and municipality across the county; however, this burden is unevenly spread across the county and its citizens depending on demographics, geography, and a host of other factors.

*"Most of the people here are kind and sweet. Some of them know our personal situation and always ask. They've helped us with our bills."*

*– Pantry Visitor*

**Dauphin County Food Insecurity Rate and Number Food Insecure by Age (MMG 2022)**



Chart data:

| Category | Number Food Insecure | Food Insecurity Rate |
|----------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Overall | 32,200 | 11.3% |
| Child | 12,400 | 19.5% |
| Adult | 19,800 | 8.9% |

■ Number Food Insecure  ●— Food Insecurity Rate
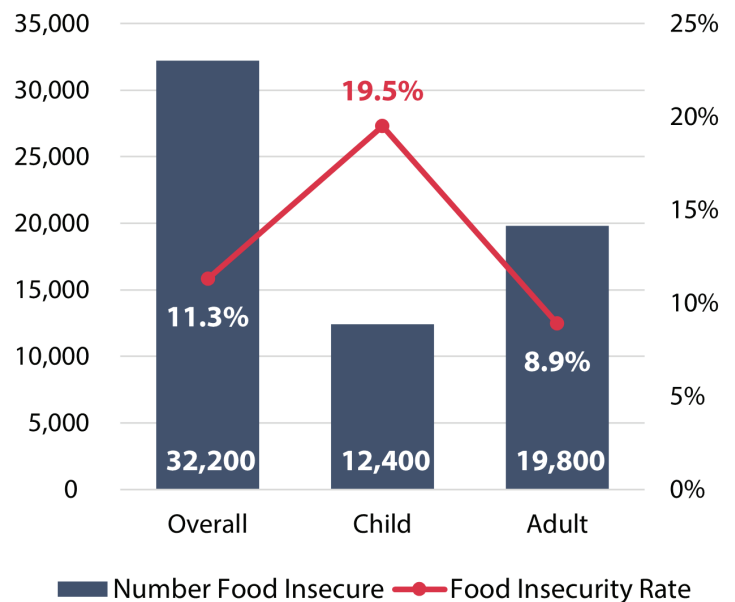
This Community Hunger Mapping report seeks to more deeply understand the dispersion, experience, and root causes of food insecurity across and within Dauphin County in a detailed, nuanced, and compassionate manner. To depict the landscape of food insecurity and the charitable food network's response to it, this report centers the thoughts of neighbors experiencing food insecurity as gathered through surveys conducted at food pantries and other community resources throughout the county as well as one-on-one interviews. As part of a unique analysis designed for this report, several interviews were conducted on site at soup kitchens to better understand the experiences of unhoused individuals who interact with the charitable food system.

The views of charitable food providers are also included via surveys and listening sessions, and for the first time in a Community Hunger Mapping project, Central Pennsylvania Food Bank (CPFB) researchers visited every pantry in the county to collect observational data about their physical and emotional environments. Quantitative analyses of public and privately available data also appear throughout this report to provide crucial perspective. This comprehensive, mixed-methods approach to the project makes it the most vibrant, complete portrait of a local charitable food network to date.



Considering the scale and complexity of food insecurity within Dauphin County, those who wish to address and alleviate it must gain deep insight into its reality, but insight is not enough to create change on its own. This report makes specific, actionable recommendations to improve the experiences of food insecure neighbors in the short term and to end hunger in the longer term.

Implementing the recommendations in this report and creating change will require intentional, sustained, collaborative work by a wide variety of stakeholders within Dauphin County, including food bank and pantry leaders, municipal, county, and state governments, anti-poverty social service organizations, healthcare providers, concerned citizens, and many more. Throughout this collective effort, the charitable food network supporting Dauphin County's most vulnerable citizens will build on its existing strengths while addressing inequities and seeking the continuous improvement needed to build a future 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 Dauphin County, and where in the region is it concentrated?

2. Who in Dauphin 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 throughout Dauphin County 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 Dauphin 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 Dauphin County? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?

### The Food Insecurity Landscape in Dauphin County

About one in nine residents of Dauphin County (32,200 individuals) faces food insecurity. In alignment with trends seen nationally, food insecurity has increased around 30% in Dauphin County since 2022 and has likely risen further since, meaning that the scope of the challenge the charitable food network faces is growing.

Food insecurity impacts every single municipality across Dauphin County; therefore, an effective response to the food insecurity situation requires concerted and sustained action from stakeholders across the entire county. There are, however, significant differences in food insecurity by age, race and ethnicity, and place across the county; so, to make the most impact, action must be tailored to the needs of each locale and demographic.

Food insecurity rates are highly disparate by race in Dauphin County. Hispanic and Black households are two and a half to three times more likely than white, non-Hispanic households to face food insecurity, with 24% and 27% rates respectively, compared to just 9% among non-Hispanic white households.

Child food insecurity is particularly severe in Dauphin County. A staggering one in five of the county's children experiences food insecurity, meaning that more than 12,000 children are uncertain from where their next meal will come. Children make up nearly 40% of the food insecure population and are 120% more likely than adults to experience food insecurity in Dauphin County. This percentage is a colossal differential and the second highest difference in child and adult food insecurity of any county in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The data shows the incredible importance of ensuring children and households with children have sufficient access to the resources they need to thrive.

Major differences in food insecurity by location exist across Dauphin County, although areas classified as having High Food Insecurity (food insecurity rates between 12% and 15%) exist in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Areas of Severe Food Insecurity (food insecurity rates of 15% or more) are concentrated in Harrisburg, southern Middletown, northern Derry Township, and the census tract covering Wiconisco and Williams Townships, along with Lykens and Williamstown boroughs, as shown in the map at right.

Harrisburg has the most severe food insecurity situation of any municipality in Dauphin County by a wide margin. The city of Harrisburg is home to less than a fifth (17%) of the total population of Dauphin County but nearly a third (30%) of the food insecure population. As shown in the map below, nine of the fourteen census tracts in Harrisburg fall into the Severe Food Insecurity typology, and six have food insecurity rates of 20% or more. No other municipality in the county has even one census tract with rates that high.

Harrisburg also has outliers, even above the 20% threshold; the census tract covering South Harrisburg, the neighborhood that lies below Interstate 83, has a food insecurity rate of 37%, meaning that two in five residents have uncertain access to food. This is by far the highest food insecurity rate of any tract in all central Pennsylvania, as it is above the tract with the next highest rate by more than ten percentage points. More than 2,000 food insecure individuals call South Harrisburg home.

The depth and severity of food insecurity in Harrisburg was also reflected in the primary data collection process. Countywide, 41% of food pantry visitors experience very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity. Very low food security corresponds with a regular reduction in the quantity of food people eat due to a lack of money with which to purchase more food. Pantry visitors in the city had by far the highest rates of very low food insecurity in the county at 52% compared to 35% in suburban and rural areas. Again, South Harrisburg is an outlier, even in an area of severe food insecurity; visitors to the pantry in South Harrisburg had the highest very low food security rates of any surveyed pantry at 66%.

Additionally, there were disparities in the experiences and severity of food insecurity by household type across Dauphin County. Pantry visitor households with children and working-age households without children have the highest rates of very low food security, at 43% and 50% respectively compared to 30% for senior households.

## Addressing Very Low Food Security in Dauphin County

Very low food security is the best measure for the actual experience of hunger, so reducing very low food security represents a north star for the charitable food system, governmental stakeholders, and other community members and institutions to work towards in the long run. This report outlines three different pathways through which stakeholders across a variety of different sectors can work to reduce very low food security among Dauphin County residents. These pathways are:

1) Strengthening the charitable food system, as it is the lowest barrier social service provider and the final line of defense against hunger. The charitable food system in Dauphin County significantly reduces very low food security for Dauphin County pantry visitors, with each successive visit resulting in fewer experiences of hunger.

2) Increasing participation in well-targeted and underutilized government programs, especially those targeted towards children and households with children. WIC participation reduces experiences of very low food security among pantry visitors.

### Dauphin County Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract (MMG 2022)
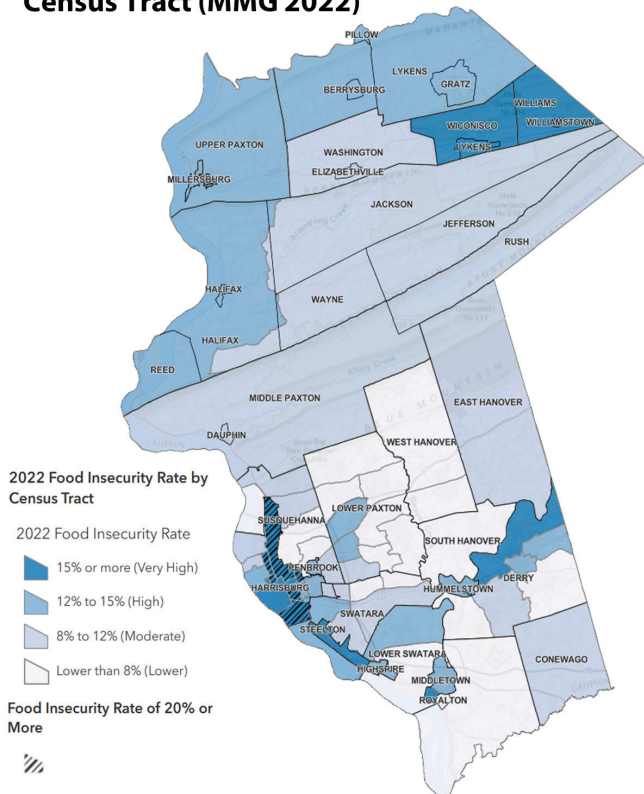


### Inset: Harrisburg Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract
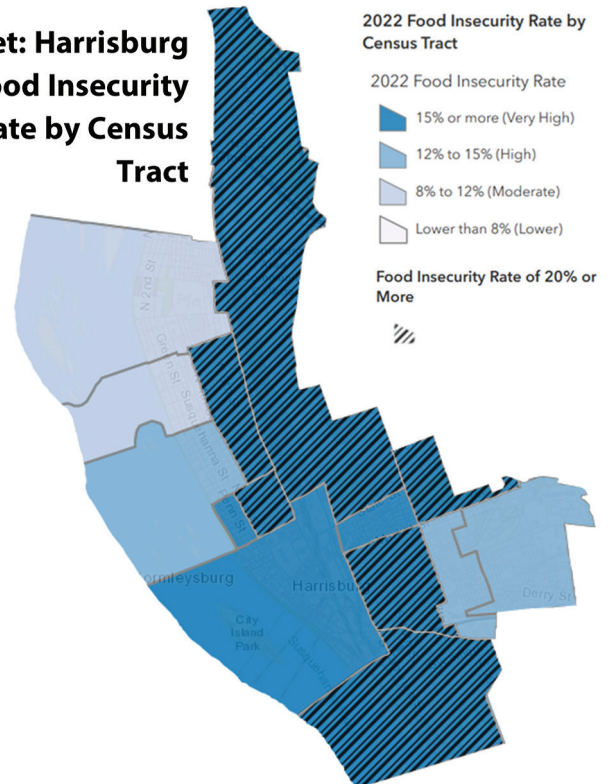
3) Addressing key upstream and intersecting issues using the respective comparative advantages of a variety of stakeholders across the county. Income, disability status, chronic health conditions, and financial access are strongly associated with lower very low food insecurity rates.

## Pathway 1: Strengthening the Charitable Food System

### Key Finding 1: Reducing Very Low Food Security

The charitable food system in Dauphin County reduces very low food security through each visit neighbors make to pantries, with a greater difference made among those who visit more. Very low food security drops from 63% among pantry visitors who visit once every three months or less (4 times or fewer in the last year), to just 37% among pantry visitors who visit around 2 times per month or more on average (20 times or more in the last year).

This finding represents the most important strength of the charitable food system because it shows that despite all the challenges facing the charitable food system in Dauphin County, pantry providers reduce hunger meaningfully among pantry visitors.

**Very Low Food Security by Visit Frequency Among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors Over a One-Year Period**
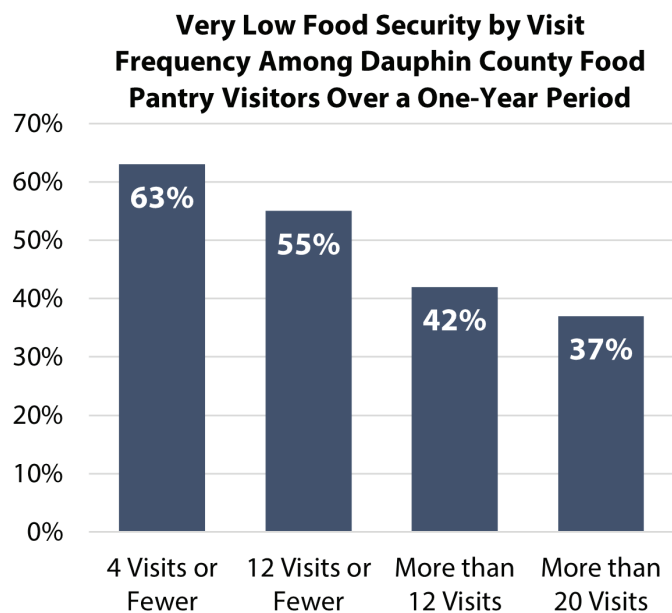
| Visit Frequency | Very Low Food Security |
| --- | --- |
| 4 Visits or Fewer | 63% |
| 12 Visits or Fewer | 55% |
| More than 12 Visits | 42% |
| More than 20 Visits | 37% |

Other major strengths of the Dauphin County charitable food system include excellent geographic access to pantries across most of the county, robust pantry opening hours including "off-hours" distributions in the evenings and weekends accessible to most county residents, and strong access to choice pantries across much of the county. While there is always room for improvement on these and other best practices, Dauphin County starts from a position of strength in many major access dimensions.



There are, however, several large opportunities for growth in key areas of access to the charitable food system that can magnify the impact of charitable food providers in reducing very low food security further. These opportunities include addressing less tangible elements of the pantry environment, like the neighbor experience and consistency in pantry adherence to compliance guidelines, as well as more concrete adjustments such as diversifying and improving food offerings and investing in pantry capacity.

### Key Finding 2: Neighbor Treatment

Staff and volunteers are critical to the operation of the charitable food system, and interactions between staff/volunteers and pantry visitor neighbors are largely positive. Neighbors often report staff and volunteers going above and beyond to help them in difficult situations and how positive interactions with staff and volunteers make the pantry experience better.

Unfortunately, there are also many negative interactions reported by neighbors at pantries; these unpleasant experiences can make people less willing to seek help. Feelings of judgment at pantries in Dauphin County averaged 7%, which is higher than in other counties where surveys have been completed. Neighbor treatment issues and conflict were severe at times in some Dauphin County pantry locations. These instances of poor treatment, stigma, and judgment likely stem at least in part, or are intensified by, a disconnect in the meaning and role of the food pantry to pantry workers and pantry visitors. Pantry staff and volunteers often view their work as simply a kind deed for their community, while pantry visitors frequently substantially rely on pantries as a main source of the food they need to feed their families.

The significance of interactions between pantry workers and pantry visitors, and the room for them to improve, indicates the importance of ensuring everyone at food pantries is treated with dignity and respect. Strategies to help pantries provide a high level of service include requiring pantry workers to attend trauma-informed care training and taking care to place volunteers and staff in roles in which they can succeed. Pantries should also work to reduce potential pain points that may arise from complicated intake practices and be worsened by inconsistent or inaccurate adherence to compliance standards.

### Key Finding 3: Compliance Practices

Many pantries have a wide variety of restrictions for neighbors that go beyond allowable practices from the USDA and Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, including strict documentation requirements for neighbors such as presenting photo IDs (required by 52% of pantries) or proof of residence like utility bills (required by 44% of pantries) at the point of service. Other non-compliant restrictions include refusing service to those who reside outside of a service territory and preventing caretakers from bringing children into the pantry.

**Most Pressing Needs for Dauphin County Pantry Providers - Percent Reporting**
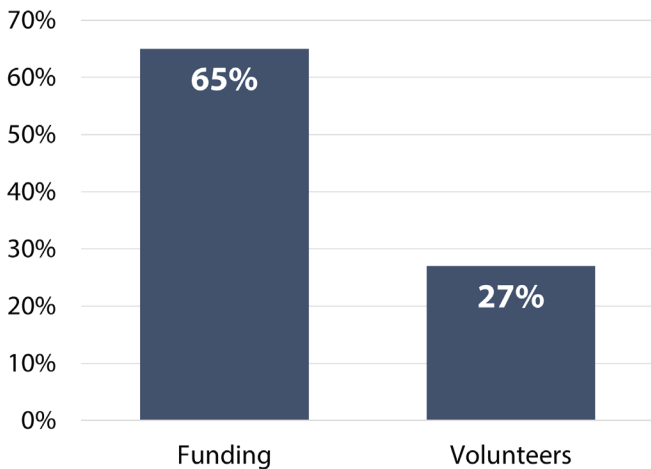


Pantries across the county must ensure their practices are consistent with food bank and government program compliance standards not only because they are required to do so, but also because doing so increases the ability of charitable food providers to reduce very low food security. There are no requirements to receive government-supported pantry services other than a completed self-declaration of need form. All other document requirements must be optional. Additionally, children must be allowed to accompany their caretakers into pantries. This is of particular importance in Dauphin County as households with children are disproportionately likely to face food insecurity and make up around half of all pantry visitors.

### Key Finding 4: Language Accessibility

Language barriers can be a significant hurdle for pantry visitors across the county. Because Dauphin County is incredibly diverse, more than 10 distinct languages are spoken among pantry visitors; Spanish is the most common besides English. Language barriers can magnify small misunderstandings about rules or pantry operations into larger conflicts and may cause pantry visitors to miss out on services they want or need.

It is important that all neighbors be set up to have an easily navigable pantry experience, regardless of their preferred language. Ways to increase accessibility could include posting signs in multiple languages and/or with easily understandable symbols, using interpretation services when possible, and offering intake forms in multiple languages. Pantries report Spanish-speaking volunteers as a major need, and multilingual, culturally competent pantry workers can make huge a positive difference to the neighbor experience.

### Key Finding 5: Pantry Capacity

Food pantries across Dauphin County report struggling with insufficient resources, in terms of both funds and volunteers to serve neighbors. Nearly two thirds of pantries reported funding as their biggest issue, and neighbors noted that their pantries work hard to provide high-quality services despite facing many constraints. One neighbor shared, "The only thing I ask is that… If they can receive more things to be able to help us with, then they would have more to give us." Pantries do all they can with limited capacity and funds, but they need more support; increasing pantries' access to support will take concerted effort from all the county's stakeholders. State and federal programs, such as the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), have not kept up with increased demand for food pantries, further stressing strained food pantry budgets.

The second biggest capacity constraint for pantries is a lack of volunteers. Volunteers are a critical piece of the charitable food system, but many pantries report not having enough to operate fully, let alone expand hours or availability. Volunteering is one of the most important ways community members can participate in the charitable food network, but volunteers and pantries finding each other is a challenge. The creation of a centralized volunteer portal could potentially provide a low-friction way for interested members of the public and pantries in search of volunteers to match with one another.

Additionally, Dauphin County is the only county in the region without a Food Policy Council, and this gap represents a significant opportunity to increase collaboration and support for increasing food access across the county. Pantries expressed appreciation for the chance to listen to and learn from each other during the hunger mapping research process and excitement about future opportunities to continue doing so, but other stakeholders are key constituents for food access as well.

## Pathway 2: Increasing Participation in Well-Targeted Government Programs

Government programs, such as WIC, school meal programs, SUN Meals (summer meal programs), and SNAP, all provide substantial support to neighbors facing food insecurity. Dauphin County overall has very strong participation in government programs, especially for SNAP, in which it has the second highest participation rate in Pennsylvania. Given the high rates of food insecurity among the county's households with children, the best-targeted opportunities to increase food access through key government programs lies in WIC, school meals, and summer meals.

### Key Finding 1:

WIC outreach is a critical tool that can be used to support the populations most likely to face very low food security in the parts of Dauphin County with the most severe food insecurity rates. WIC reduces very low food security by more than 20% among likely-eligible pantry visitor households, but less than a third (32%) participate in WIC, with participation rates among Hispanic households especially low at 24%.

The ZIP Codes with the largest participation gaps are all in Harrisburg and its suburbs (17104, 17109, and 17103), with 17104 alone having nearly 40% of the county's total participation gap. There are major opportunities for increased outreach collaboration between the WIC office and pantries, including with WIC mobile clinics, which are a proven way to increase access to and uptake of the program.

### Key Finding 2:

Dauphin County schools have strong participation in meal programs, but there are more than 20 schools, most of which are middle or high schools, that have breakfast participation rates at or below 25%, despite it being universally free to all students. Research shows that alternative breakfast models are effective ways to increase breakfast uptake, but they are underutilized at these schools.

### Key Finding 3:

Food insecure children are especially vulnerable in the summertime, when school is closed and school meals are not available. SUN Meal programs exist to fill this gap, but access to sites is limited in parts of Dauphin County. Areas of opportunity include placing traditional congregate meal sites Steelton-Highspire School District and parts of Lower Dauphin School District and offering rural non-congregate services in much of Northern Dauphin.

## Pathway 3: Addressing Key Upstream and Intersecting Issues

The most important upstream and intersecting issues identified by Dauphin County food pantry visitors included limited income and low wages, housing insecurity, chronic health conditions, financial access, and transportation. Each of the factors is examined in-depth in the report.

### Key Finding 1:

Income is the most important determinant of food security status nationally and among pantry visitors in Dauphin County, with the primary issues being low wages, irregular work, and the inadequacy of benefits rather than unemployment. Most pantry visitors who can work, do work, but over half of all full-time workers report earning less than the poverty level for their household size. For most workers, a poverty-level threshold works out to wages of $11.50 an hour or less. Disability is one of the biggest risk factors for food insecurity, both for households receiving Disability or SSI and for those who report disability as the main barrier to work but do not receive benefits.

### Key Finding 2:

Housing and housing-related expenses like utilities are the number one tradeoff with food reported by pantry visitors. Forced moves are also a major issue that disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic households, especially those living in the city of Harrisburg.

**Very Low Food Security by Forced Move Status Among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| Experienced a Forced Move | 67% |
| Worried about a Forced Move | 63% |
| Neither | 31% |

0%          40%          80%
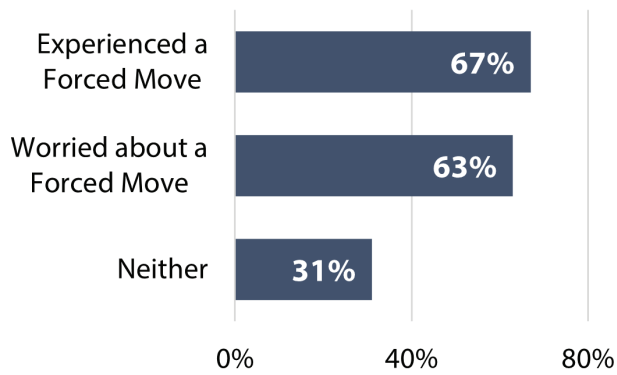
Around a third (31%) of pantry visitors in Harrisburg are worried about a forced move and 14% have experienced one. These are the highest rates of forced moves found in any county where Community Hunger Mapping has been completed. Forced moves have a strong association with very low food security status, as two thirds of households who have experienced are worried about a forced move also experience very low food security.

**Key Finding 3:**

Housing precarity, defined as living situations that are doubled-up, sleeping rough, or in a shelter, is one of the most direct determinants of very low food security status, with households in precarious housing situations facing very low food security rates of 57% compared to 41% overall. Unhoused households in Harrisburg report that food is accessible to them via a number of providers across the city and that these providers treat them with dignity and respect, but they still assume a variety of risks when accessing these resources. Housing is critically important to making measurable progress to reducing very low food security among these households.

**Key Finding 4:**

Vehicle access is one of the most common barriers to both pantry access and employment cited by pantry visitors in Dauphin County, with more than half of pantry visitors in Harrisburg reporting a primary means of transportation other than a car, and many reporting difficulty accessing employment opportunities as a result.

**Key Finding 5:**

Half of all food pantry visitor households have at least one individual facing a chronic health condition, with 45% of pantry visitor households managing high blood pressure or diabetes. The charitable food system should continue to strengthen its partnerships with health providers across Dauphin County, as food insecurity and health have intersecting and additive interactions.

## *Addressing the Pathways through Stakeholder Partnerships and Unique Roles*

This report demonstrates that each stakeholder across the county, regardless of sector, has an important role to play in working to reduce hunger, especially given the enormous scope and depth of food insecurity in Dauphin County and its myriad, multifaceted causes. Stakeholders each have unique relationships and positionalities within the county that bring with them a variety of comparative advantages to address the different issue areas illuminated in this report.

Neighbors view the charitable food system as one of the lowest barrier social service providers, and pantries are often the first places people turn to when they need help. Pantries should lean into this status and make every effort to be trusted institutions within their communities. Along with food banks and other stakeholders in the charitable food system, pantries are positioned to play a unique, leading role in pursuing each of these three pathways to reduce food insecurity and eventually end hunger.

More information about each of the three pathways can be found in Section 2 (strengthening charitable food services), Section 3 (increasing utilization of government programs), and Section 4 (addressing key upstream and intersecting issues) of this report, while Section 1 provides an overview of the food insecurity landscape within Dauphin County.

## METHODS

This final report is the outcome of an intensive, 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 Dauphin County, as well as the input of community leaders and food pantry providers. Data and quotes included in this report are deidentified to the greatest 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 2018-2022 5-Year Estimates, 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, child congregate meal program site and participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and USDA, and Feeding America Map the Meal Gap 2024 data with 2022 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 a technical appendix, available upon request.

### NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

In Spring 2024, CPFB researchers conducted surveys at twelve geographically and demographically representative food pantries across Dauphin County. A total of 756 surveys were completed across the twelve 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 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.

### NON-PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AT FOOD PANTRIES

To include as many agency partners as possible in the Community Hunger Mapping process, CPFB researchers visited 37 pantries that were not survey sites to observe pantry operation during food distribution/pantry hours. These observations helped CPFB researchers bring a broader understanding of pantry practices and the neighbor experience of accessing charitable food to this report.

### 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 nine 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.

### SOUP KITCHEN AND PANTRY UTILIZATION AMONG HOMELESS NEIGHBORS IN HARRISBURG

In collaboration with Dr. Jennifer Frank and Dr. Mary Glazier of Millersville University, CPFB completed an evaluation of food access in the city of Harrisburg from the perspective of unsheltered neighbors and the service providers working to meet this community need. Researchers conducted 15 in-person interviews of individuals accessing the soup kitchen during the noon meal at Downtown Daily Bread and three interviews of formal and grassroots organizations who fund, coordinate, or serve food to the community in Harrisburg. Transcripts were coded using Nvivo software and processed for overall themes.

### 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 50 total participants from 3 locations across Dauphin County.

### PARTNER LISTENING SESSIONS

CPFB agency partners from Dauphin County were invited to attend a listening session 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 one in-person listening session at the Annual Dauphin County State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) meeting in Harrisburg in June 2024, and one virtual listening session. A total of 37 individuals participated in the listening sessions, representing 29 different agencies.

### PARTNER SURVEYS

The CPFB Policy Research team distributed pantry surveys to agency partners who operate pantries that do not limit participation by age or military status across Dauphin County. The surveys asked questions regarding distribution type and frequency, operating hours, policies for food pantry visitors, other services offered, and pantry capacity. A total of 43 pantries completed surveys via mail, email, and online. Best efforts were made to include the relevant information for non-respondents.

### SERVICE INSIGHTS DATA

To develop the census tract level food pantry access gap map, this report utilized electronic neighbor intake and pantry service data from the 18 pantries in Dauphin County that use Service Insights on MealConnect, a software platform developed by Feeding America. Information about the methodology used in the gap analysis is provided in abbreviated form in the report and in detail in the technical appendix.

**756 Neighbor Surveys**
*at 12 pantry locations*

**37 Non-participant Observations at Food Pantries**

**9 One-on-one Neighbor Interviews**

**Specialized Research with Vulnerable Populations**

**50 Non-food Pantry Surveys**
*at 3 locations across the county*

**37 Partner Listening Session Participants**
*via one in-person and one virtual session*

**18 Pantries Sharing Anonymous Service Data**

**43 Partner Surveys**

## Food Insecurity: Low Food Security and Very Low Food Security

Food insecurity is defined as lack of access or uncertainty of access to the food needed for an active, healthy life.[1] The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition of food security divides it into four distinct categories: High Food Security, Marginal Food Security, Low Food Security, and Very Low Food Security. These four categories are shown in the figure below.[2]

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, though it is important to note that very low food security does not specifically measure hunger, as hunger is the physical sensation of discomfort or weakness from lack of food alongside the need to eat. Both overall and very low food security will be discussed throughout the report.

The mission of traditional food banking and food pantry work is to prevent people from needing to reduce the quantity and quality of foods they consume, even if they lack the funds to purchase food. Although traditional charitable food work cannot directly reduce the economic insecurity that causes worry about food access and corresponding low food security, it has great potential to impact very low food security. Therefore, the charitable food system in Dauphin County should focus first and foremost on reducing very low food security.
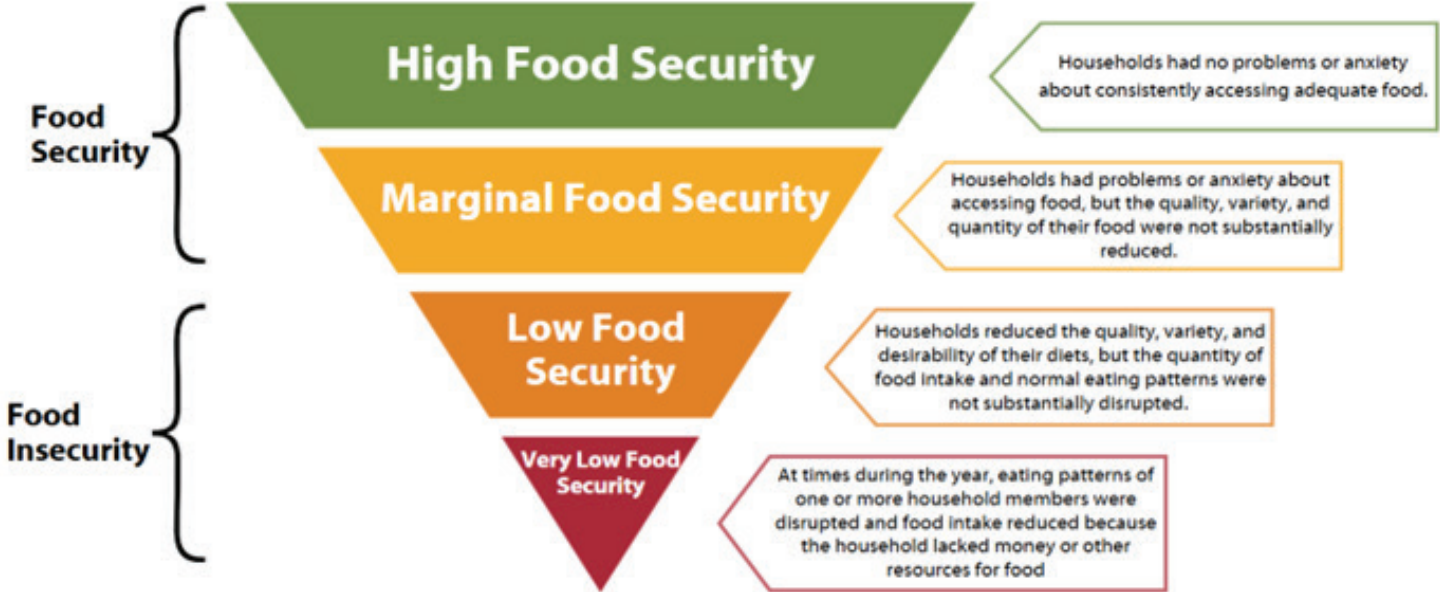
# Food Insecurity in Dauphin County
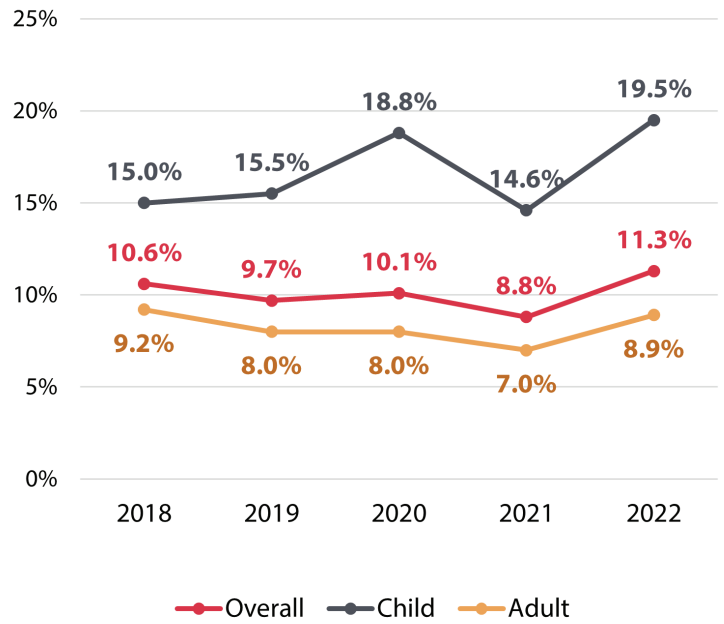
Dauphin County has an overall food insecurity rate of 11.3% as of Feeding America's 2022 Map the Meal Gap estimates. About one in nine residents of the county, or 32,200 individuals, experienced uncertainty about access to or a shortage of food. The burden of food insecurity was not evenly spread across the county; there were significant disparities in food insecurity by demographic, such as age and race or ethnicity.
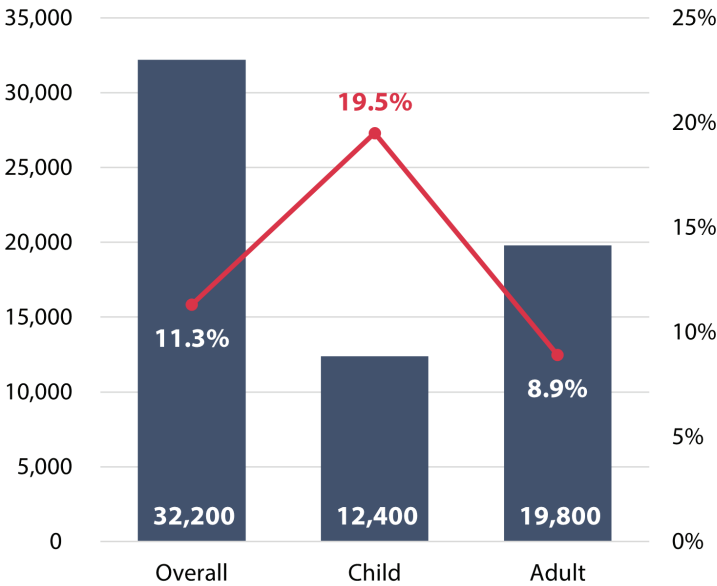
In 2022, Dauphin County's child food insecurity rate was 19.5%, meaning that about one in five, or 12,400 children faced food insecurity. Children were 120% more likely to experience food insecurity than adults. This proportion is the second highest ratio of child to adult food insecurity for a county in the state, after only Philadelphia.

Hispanic and Black individuals in Dauphin County also faced disproportionate food insecurity rates in 2022. With food insecurity rates of 24% and 27% respectively, Hispanic and Black individuals were about three times as likely to be food insecure compared to non-Hispanic white individuals, for whom the food insecurity rate was 9%.

**Dauphin County Food Insecurity Rate by Age, 2018-2022 (Map the Meal Gap)**



**Dauphin County Food Insecurity Rate and Number Food Insecure by Age (MMG 2022)**



**Food Insecurity Rate by Race and Ethnicity (MMG 2022)**
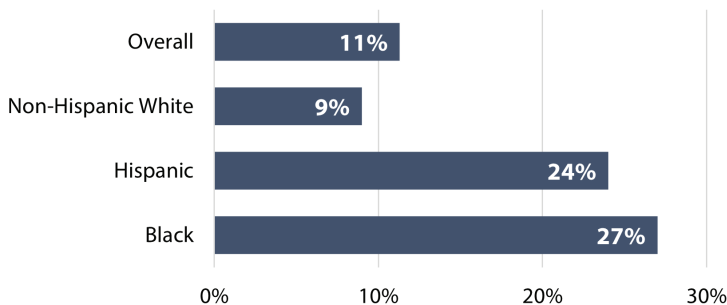


## FOOD INSECURITY IN DAUPHIN COUNTY OVER TIME

Food insecurity in Dauphin County has varied significantly over the last several years, especially for children. Between 2021 and 2022, food insecurity in Dauphin County increased 28%. Among children, the rate jumped even more sharply, rising 34%. These spikes in food insecurity were in line with statewide and national trends in food insecurity and poverty rates in this time frame.

This unprecedented one-year increase in food insecurity was the result of the expiration of specific public policies enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic that had driven sizable drops in poverty and food insecurity, with the most significant of these being the expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC).

The CTC expansion was signed into law as part of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and was in effect only in 2021. The ARP raised the maximum credit amount for that year from $2,000 per child to $3,600 per child under the age of 6 or $3,000 per child aged 6 to 17.[3] Importantly, the expanded CTC was also fully refundable and paid out in the form of monthly $250 or $300 payments rather than as a lump sum at tax time.[4] These changes to the credit's design significantly increased its utility to very low-income households. Many would not have qualified for the traditional CTC at all, as they may not have met the minimum income thresholds, and those who did would have had to wait until tax time to realize the benefit.

**Food and Stress among Dauphin County Students (Pennsylvania Youth Survey)**



— Worried about Running out of Food
— Skipped a Meal Because of Family Finances
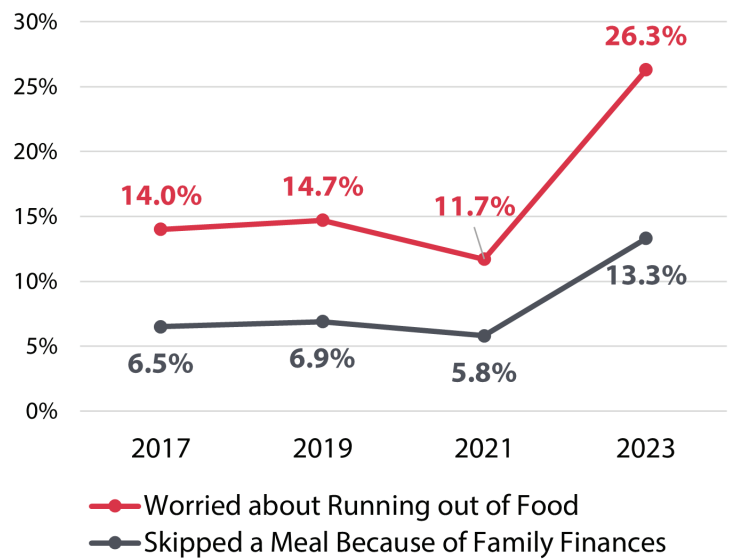
The positive impact of the expanded CTC on child poverty and food insecurity was evident both nationally and locally; across the country, it lifted 2.1 million children out of poverty[5] and was the key driver of the largest decrease in food insecurity for children since 1998, which is the earliest year from which comparable food insecurity data is available.[6] Locally, child food insecurity dropped 29% between 2020 and 2021.

It is clear, based on this evidence, that a targeted investment of sufficient scale can meaningfully reduce lived food insecurity among children and push overall food insecurity below its previous floor, a result that economic growth and low unemployment have not been able to accomplish alone.

Since the expansion's expiration in 2022, the CTC has returned to having a maximum value of $2,000, being paid on an annual rather than monthly basis, and excluding the lowest income households. These policy reversions have severely curtailed the CTC's impact on child poverty and food insecurity on a large and small scale alike. As discussed above, Dauphin County child food insecurity rates rebounded even higher than pre-pandemic levels between 2021 and 2022 after the CTC expired, according to Feeding America's estimates. All-age food insecurity rates exceeded pre-pandemic rates; this may be related to the unwinding of other pandemic response programs and to high grocery inflation. National food insecurity rates in 2023 continued this upward trend in food insecurity. In that year, food insecurity rates were the highest they had been since the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2014.[7]

Data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) that was featured in Penn State Health's recent Community Health Needs Assessment shows the same worrying trend for children as the food insecurity estimates in the wake of the expanded CTC's expiration.

PAYS asked Pennsylvania students in 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grades if they worried about running out of food or had skipped a meal because of their family's finances in the past year; in Dauphin County in 2023, more than a quarter of surveyed students (26.3%) reported that they worried about running out of food and about one in eight (13.3%) actually skipped a meal because their family did not have enough money for food.

By contrast, rates for each category in 2021, the previous year in which PAYS was conducted and the year in which the expanded CTC and universal school meals were in effect, were dramatically lower at 11.7% and 5.8% respectively.[8] These findings provide compelling evidence of the meaningful impact the expanded CTC and universal school meals had for children and families and could have again if renewed.

**FOOD INSECURITY IN DAUPHIN COUNTY IN REGIONAL CONTEXT**

Dauphin County's 11.3% countywide food insecurity rate is slightly lower than the Pennsylvania statewide rate of 11.9% as of 2022.

Compared to its immediate neighbors, Dauphin County's overall food insecurity rate is about average as well. Perry, Cumberland, York, and Lancaster have overall food insecurity rates below 11%, while Lebanon County has a food insecurity rate of 11.8%. Northumberland and Schuylkill have the highest food insecurity rates in the region at 13.3% and 13.4% respectively.

**Child Food Insecurity Rate by County**
**(Map the Meal Gap 2022 Estimate)**

Northumberland 18.2%
Schuylkill 17.8%
Perry 13.4%
Dauphin 19.5%
Lebanon 14.7%
Cumberland 12.8%
Lancaster 12.3%
York 14.3%

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Child Food Insecurity Rate
10.0%          19.5%
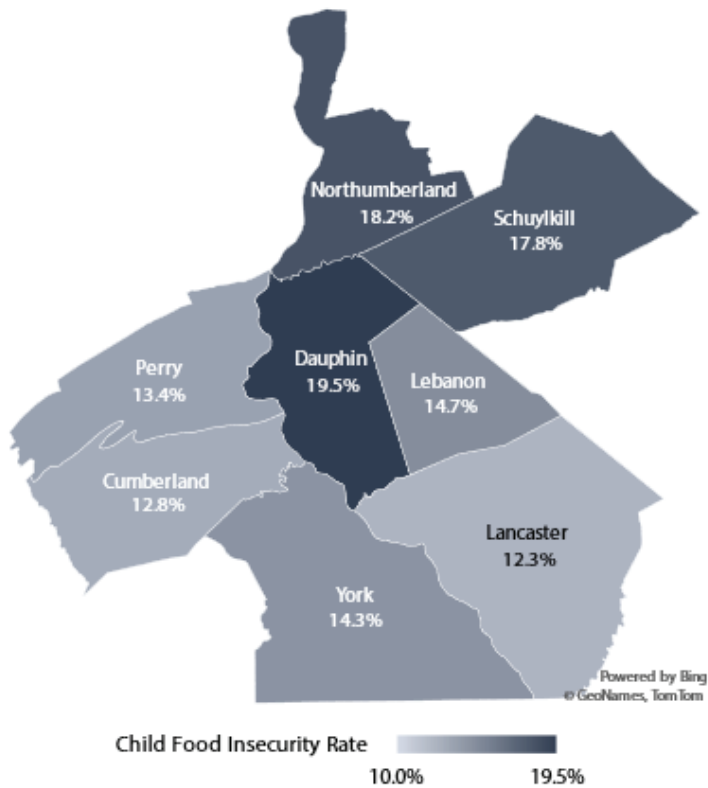
**Overall Food Insecurity By County**
**(Map the Meal Gap 2022 Estimate)**

Northumberland 13.3%
Schuylkill 13.4%
Perry 10.5%
Dauphin 11.3%
Lebanon 11.8%
Cumberland 10.0%
Lancaster 10.1%
York 10.4%

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Food Insecurity Rate
10.0%          19.5%

While Dauphin County has average overall food insecurity rates, the child food insecurity rate in Dauphin County is the highest among all its neighbors.

As mentioned earlier in this report, nearly one in five (19.5%) children in Dauphin County face food insecurity, and children are 120% more likely to face food insecurity than adults.

The county with the next highest child food insecurity in the region, Northumberland, was more than a full percentage point behind Dauphin at 18.2%, followed by Schuylkill at 17.8%. The disparity in food insecurity rate by age was significantly smaller in these two counties, with children being between 45% and 50% more likely to face food insecurity than adults.

No other county in the region had a child food insecurity rate above 15.0%, though Lebanon and York approached it at 14.7% and 14.3% each. Although child food insecurity is a major concern across central Pennsylvania, it is clearly an especially severe issue in Dauphin County.

### NATIONAL FOOD INSECURITY DISPARITIES BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE
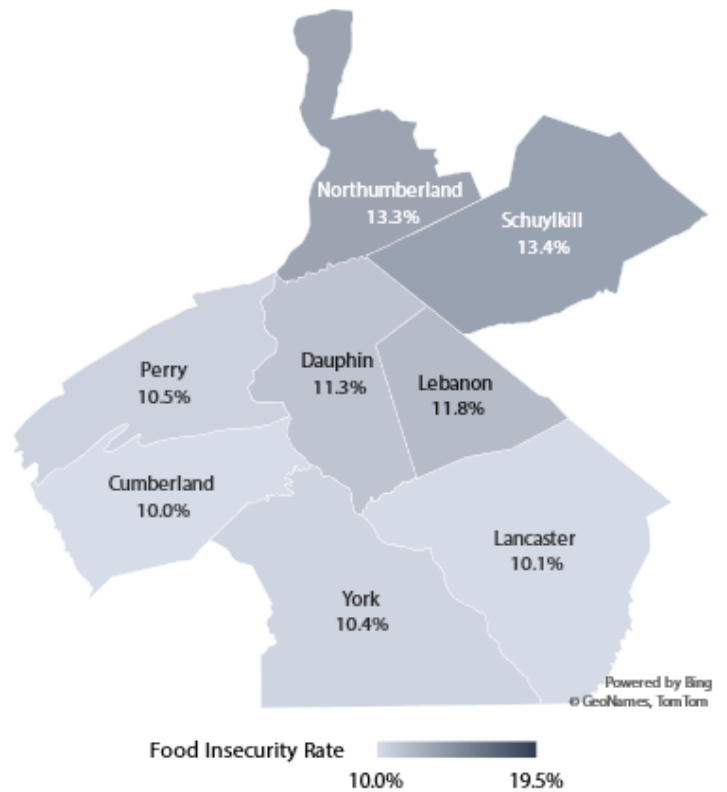
Nationally, households with children are by far the most likely to experience food insecurity. While more specific food insecurity data by household type is not available at the local level, USDA annual reports provide breakdowns on the prevalence of food insecurity by household type at the national level.

As of the most recent USDA report, which provides statistics for 2023, food insecurity by household type broke down as follows:

• Households with children had a food insecurity rate of 17.9%.

    – Food insecurity rates were highest for single female-headed households with children at 34.7%.

    – Single male-headed households with children had lower, but still elevated food insecurity rates of 22.6%.

• Households without children had a food insecurity rate of 11.9%.

• Households with seniors had a food insecurity rate of 9.3%, which is the lowest food insecurity rate of any household type other than households without children and more than one adult (8.6%).

• Elderly living alone households had a slightly higher food insecurity rate of 11.0%, but this was lower than working-age women or men households who live alone (16.1% and 14.0%, respectively).[9]

# Sub-County Food Insecurity in Dauphin County

Food insecurity rates and the number of food insecure individuals vary significantly across different parts of Dauphin County. This section analyzes food insecurity rates and the number of food insecure individuals within Dauphin County by census tract as of 2022. Census tracts were chosen as the unit of analysis for this section for several reasons; first and foremost, they are the smallest geography for which Feeding America produces food insecurity estimates, but they have additional benefits as well. Census tracts are relatively even in population and, in Pennsylvania, generally align with neighborhoods in cities and municipalities in suburbs or rural areas, making them helpful geographic units to use when comparing different localities.

In this analysis, census tracts were divided into four typologies with roughly even numbers of census tracts in each group: Lower Food Insecurity (lower than 8%), Moderate Food Insecurity (8-12%), High Food Insecurity (12-15%) and Severe Food Insecurity (15% or more). In Dauphin County, there were several census tracts categorized with Severe Food Insecurity that themselves are outliers within their own typology; these tracts, which had 2022 food insecurity rates at or above 20%, have been marked with black shading.
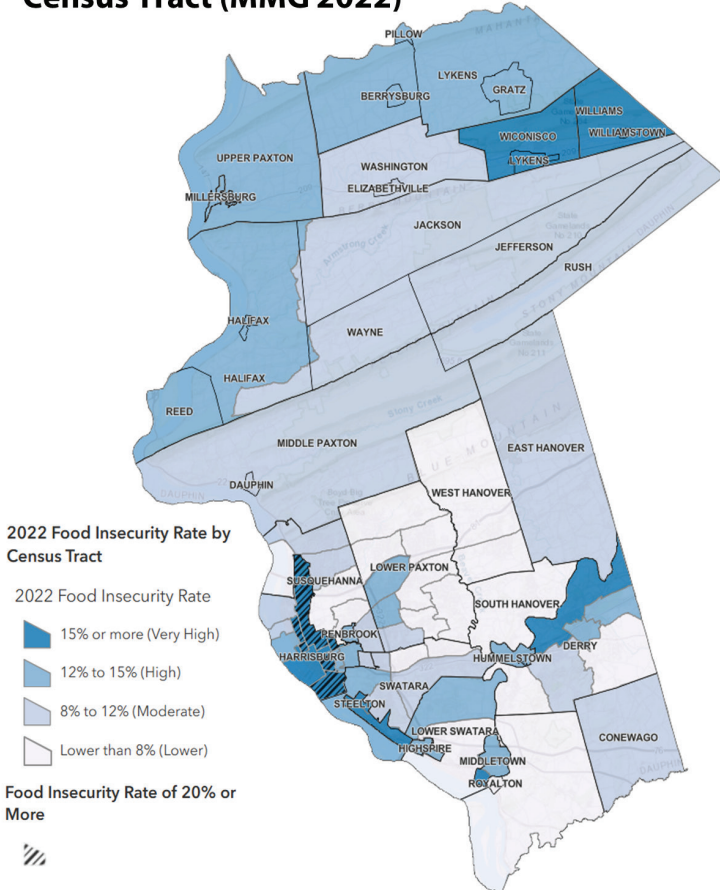
## FOOD INSECURITY RATE BY CENSUS TRACT

Overall, Severe Food Insecurity tracts primarily lie in Harrisburg and Steelton. The city of Harrisburg faces especially high food insecurity rates, with six of the city's fourteen census tracts having food insecurity rates over 20%, more than five percentage points higher than any other census tract in the county. However, southern Middletown, northern Derry Township, and the census tract covering Wiconisco and Williams Townships, along with Lykens and Williamstown boroughs, also fall into the Severe Food Insecurity typology.

Much of the rest of northern Dauphin County, including the Millersburg and Halifax areas, is classified as High Food Insecurity. Parts of the Harrisburg suburbs, including Lower Paxton Township, Swatara Township, Lower Swatara Township, Highspire, and Penbrook, as well as more outlying areas like Hummelstown, Middletown, and Hershey, are High Food Insecurity areas as well.

Moderate Food Insecurity tracts mostly cover the Peters Mountain and Blue Mountain ridge areas in the central part of the county, while Lower Food Insecurity tracts account for most of the Harrisburg suburbs as well as southern Dauphin County along the Lancaster County border.

A closer look at Harrisburg, shown in the map below, reveals that most of the city falls into the Severe Food Insecurity typology and that all six of the census tracts in the county with food insecurity rates above 20% are within the city limits.

## Dauphin County Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract (MMG 2022)



## Inset: Harrisburg Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract
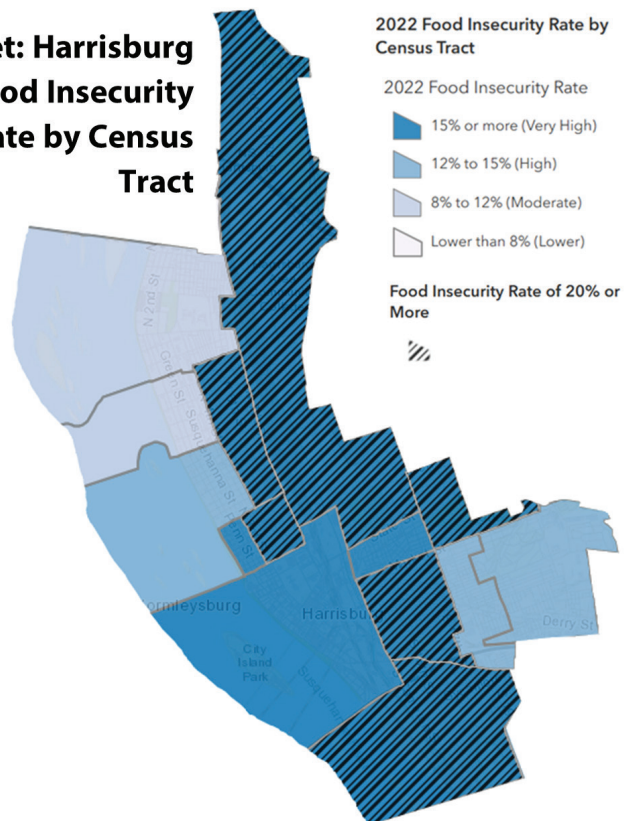
The six tracts with extremely high food insecurity cover sections of Midtown and Uptown, extending from the intersection of Forster St and Susquehanna St in the southwest all the way to the Farm Show Complex into the northeast and much of Allison Hill. South Harrisburg, the area south of Interstate 83 including Hall Manor, is also a Severe Food Insecurity tract.

In fact, the South Harrisburg tract has by far the highest food insecurity rate in the entire county at 37%, nearly 10 percentage points higher than the census tract with the next highest food insecurity rate. More than one in three residents of South Harrisburg faced food insecurity in 2022. This staggering rate is the highest of any census tract in the entirety of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's 27-county service area.

Neighborhoods falling under the High Food Insecurity typology in Harrisburg include the easternmost portion of Allison Hill and the area of Midtown bounded by Reilly St, 4th St, Maclay St, and the Susquehanna River. Uptown Harrisburg's two census tracts are the only tracts in the city considered to be part of the Moderate Food Insecurity typology. There are no Lower Food Insecurity tracts in Harrisburg.

## NUMBER OF FOOD INSECURE INDIVIDUALS BY CENSUS TRACT

Turning to the number of food insecure individuals by census tract highlights the uneven distribution of the food insecure population, as well as the overall population, across Dauphin County.

Census tracts with very large numbers of food insecure individuals exclusively lie south of Peters and Blue Mountains; most are in Harrisburg, but two lie in Lower Paxton Township near the intersection of Interstates 83 and 81, and one is in northern Steelton borough. All these tracts have more than 700 food insecure individuals each, and some have many more.

Lower, but still substantial, numbers of food insecure individuals are visible in northwestern and central Dauphin County around Millersburg, Halifax, and Dauphin, while more moderate numbers of food insecure individuals can be found throughout the Harrisburg suburbs and the Middletown, Hummelstown, and Hershey.

Regions with fewer food insecure individuals broadly tend to be less populous areas, such as Conewago Township in the far southeast, Jackson, Wayne, and Jefferson Townships atop the mountains, and a notably industrial tract in Steelton borough.

Zooming in on Harrisburg (right) shows that the census tracts with large numbers of food insecure individuals in the city are also those with high food insecurity rates.

**Dauphin County Number of Food Insecure Individuals by Census Tract (MMG 2022)**



2022 Number Food Insecure by Census Tract

◄ > 763
◄ 493
◄ < 224
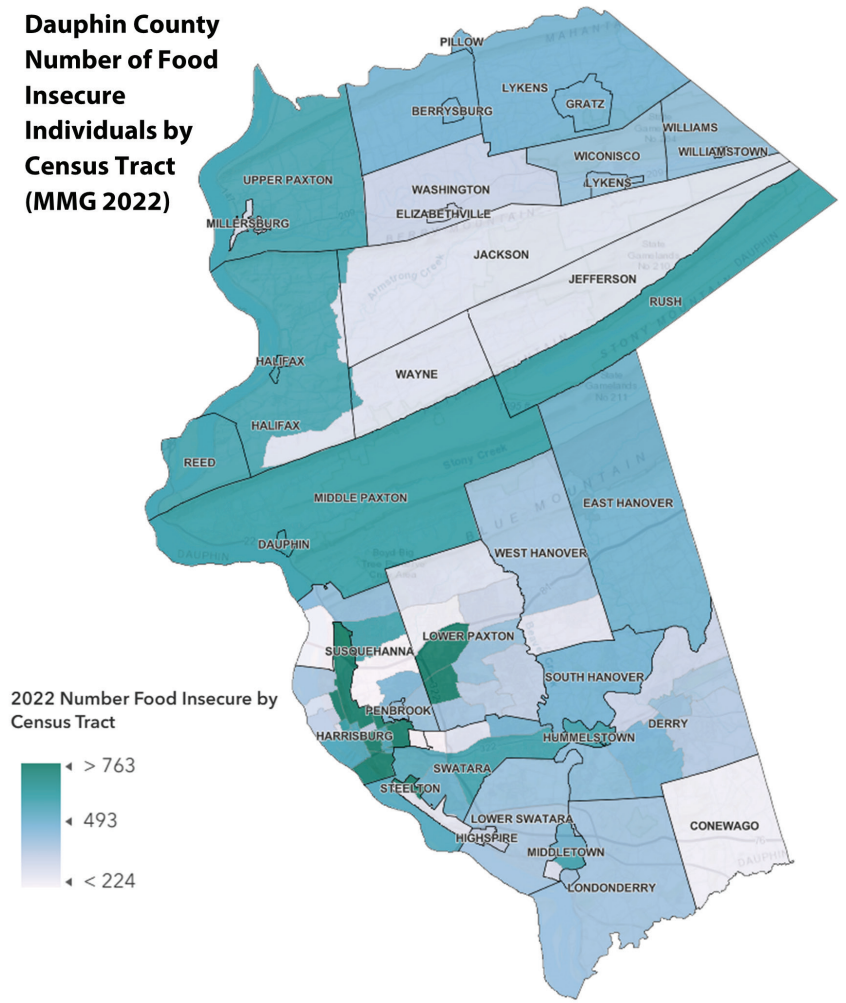
**Inset: Harrisburg City Number of Food Insecure Individuals by Census Tract**



2022 Number Food Insecure by Census Tract

◄ > 763
◄ 493
◄ < 224
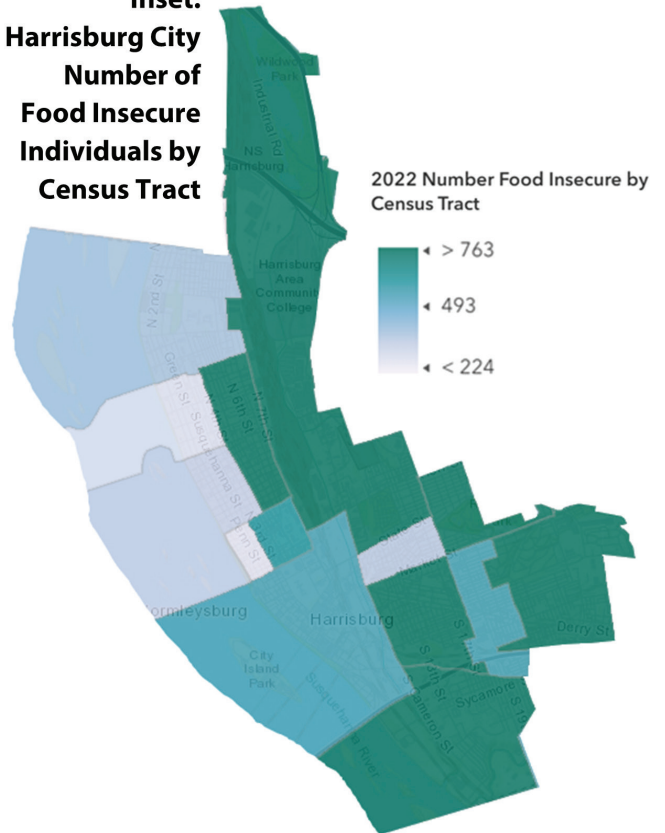
The census tract covering the neighborhood south of Interstate 83 again stands out, even within an area with widespread Severe Food Insecurity; this census tract alone is home to 2,000 food insecure individuals, accounting for 6.2% of the food insecure population of the county and more than a fifth (20.2%) of the city's food insecure population. The census tract to the immediate north covering South Allison Hill has another 1,130 food insecure individuals (3.5% of countywide total; 11.4% of citywide total). No other tract has more than 1,000 food insecure individuals, though the tract covering the Cameron Street corridor nears it at 920 (2.9% of countywide total; 9.3% of citywide total).

Overall, Harrisburg is home to nearly a third of the countywide food insecure population, with 9,880 of 32,200 food insecure individuals, or 30.2%, despite having just 17.3% of the county's population.

## The Extent of Food Insecurity among Food Pantry Visitors in Dauphin County

Food pantry visitors are far more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population. Across Dauphin County, 76% of pantry visitors experienced food insecurity, with 41% experiencing very low food security. This means that more than 4 in 10 food pantry visitors countywide still go hungry on a regular basis. Very low food security is a measure of the most important aim of the charitable food system – to reduce and eventually eliminate hunger.

Like general food insecurity, very low food security is not evenly distributed across the county. To provide more granular insights into the food insecurity landscape of Dauphin County, food pantry survey results are often categorized into regions throughout this report.

These regions are Harrisburg, Urban/Suburban Dauphin County, and Rural Dauphin County. Pantries located within the municipal boundaries of the city of Harrisburg are categorized as Harrisburg, pantries in the Harrisburg suburbs as well as pantries in Hershey/Hummelstown and Middletown are classified as Urban/Suburban Dauphin County, and pantries in rural areas of Dauphin County, mostly in northern Dauphin County, but also in the Grantville area, are categorized as Rural Dauphin County.

**Very Low Food Security Status among Pantry Visitors in Dauphin County and by Region**
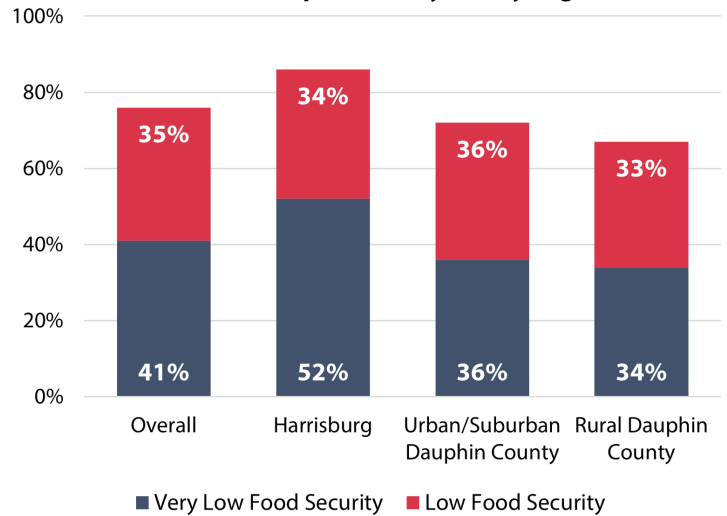


More than half of pantry visitors in Harrisburg reported experiencing very low food security. Harrisburg pantry visitors have a very low food security rate of 52%, compared to 36% and 34% in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County and Rural Dauphin County, respectively. Pantry visitors in Harrisburg were therefore between 44% and 53% more likely to have experienced a lack of food than pantry visitors elsewhere in Dauphin County, even though both groups accessed food resources designed to reduce food insecurity. While this disparity in very low food security broadly aligns with the disparity in general food insecurity seen in the Map the Meal Gap estimates for the county, this disparity between Harrisburg and the rest of the county is still an alarming finding.

To develop these estimates, pantry visitors were asked a six-question food security module from the USDA. Answers to these questions among pantry visitors across Dauphin County are provided in the figure on the following page.

More than 80% of pantry visitors stated that the food they had did not last and they did not have money for more "sometimes" or "often", while 70% said they "sometimes" or "often" could not afford balanced meals. More than 50% of pantry visitors responded that they had eaten less or skipped meals because they did not have enough money for food. A total of 38% of pantry visitors, approximately the same number that experienced very low food security, reported going hungry because they did not have enough money for food. More than 45% of pantry visitors stated that they skipped meals at least some months, while 21% skipped meals every single month.

As might be expected based on the geographic disparity in very low food security rate, there were vast differences in the responses to the food security battery by pantry location in Dauphin County. Harrisburg pantry visitors consistently answered all six underlying questions affirmatively at higher rates than did pantry visitors in other parts of the county.

## Responses to Underlying Food Security Questions among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors

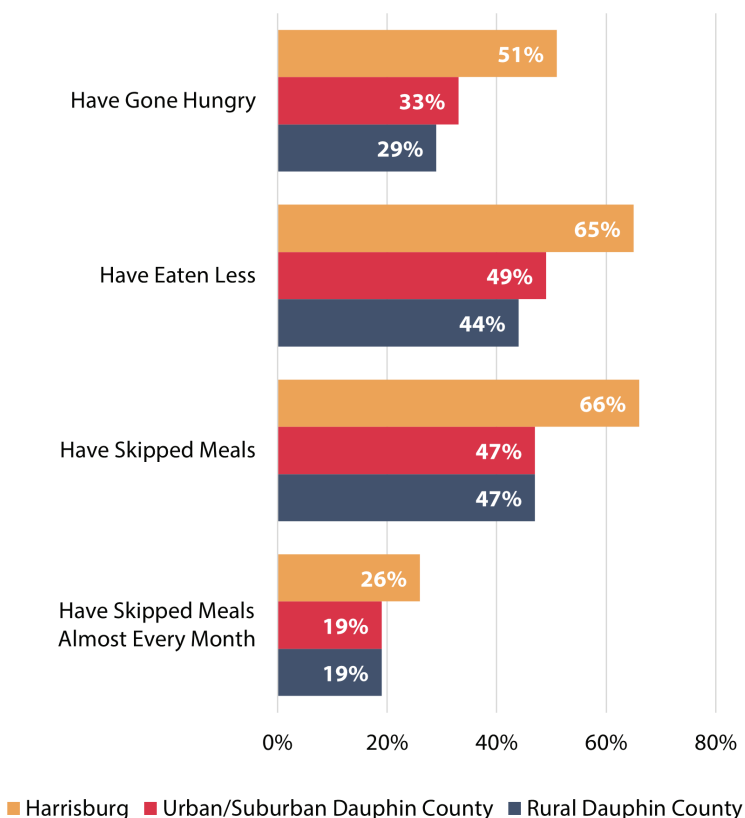| Question | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Sometimes or Often Could Not Afford Balanced Meals | 70% |
| Food We Had Did Not Last and Did Not Have Money for More Food Sometimes or Often | 81% |
| Have Gone Hungry | 38% |
| Have Eaten Less | 53% |
| Have Skipped Meals | 53% |
| Have Skipped Meals Some Months or Almost Every Month | 45% |
| Have Skipped Meals Almost Every Month | 21% |
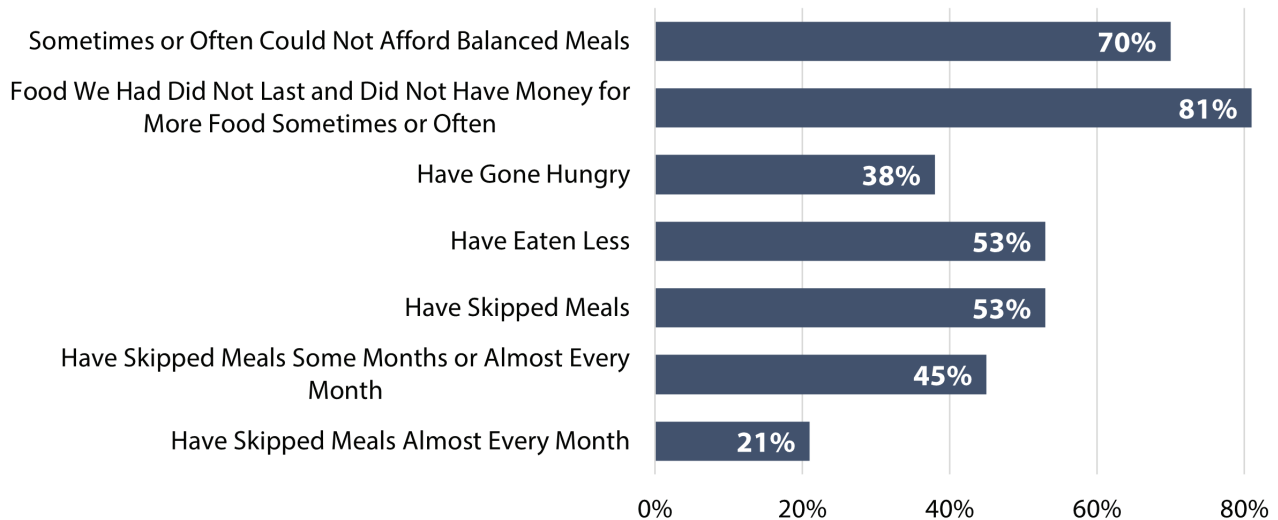
Responses to four of the questions by region are provided below. More than 50% of pantry visitors in Harrisburg reported going hungry because there was not enough money for food, compared to 33% and 29% in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County and Rural Dauphin County, respectively. Additionally, 66% of Harrisburg pantry visitors said they had skipped meals, with 26% saying that they had skipped meals every single month, compared to 47% and 19% for Urban/Suburban Dauphin County and Rural Dauphin County.

Turning to differences by race/ethnicity, Hispanic households who visit food pantries are more likely to have reported experiencing very low food security than both Black and non-Hispanic white households, as shown in the figure below.

This pattern somewhat follows the overall data on food insecurity by race/ethnicity in that non-Hispanic white households experience both the lowest rates of food insecurity and the lowest rates of very low food security across the county. However, according to Map the Meal Gap, Black households have higher estimated food insecurity rates in the county than do Hispanic households. This divergence between survey responses and Map the Meal Gap may be explained by two key factors among survey respondents. First, nearly 40% of Black pantry visitors (39%) visited charitable food providers more than 12 times in the last year, while just 27% of Hispanic pantry visitors did the same. Second, 77% of Hispanic pantry visitors had incomes below the federal poverty line compared to 65% for Black pantry visitors.

### Responses to Underlying Food Security Questions by Dauphin County Region

| Question | Harrisburg | Urban/Suburban Dauphin County | Rural Dauphin County |
|---|---|---|---|
| Have Gone Hungry | 51% | 33% | 29% |
| Have Eaten Less | 65% | 49% | 44% |
| Have Skipped Meals | 66% | 47% | 47% |
| Have Skipped Meals Almost Every Month | 26% | 19% | 19% |

■ Harrisburg  ■ Urban/Suburban Dauphin County  ■ Rural Dauphin County

### Very Low Food Security by Race/Ethnicity among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors

| Race/Ethnicity | Percentage |
|---|---|
| White | 37% |
| Hispanic | 48% |
| Black | 39% |

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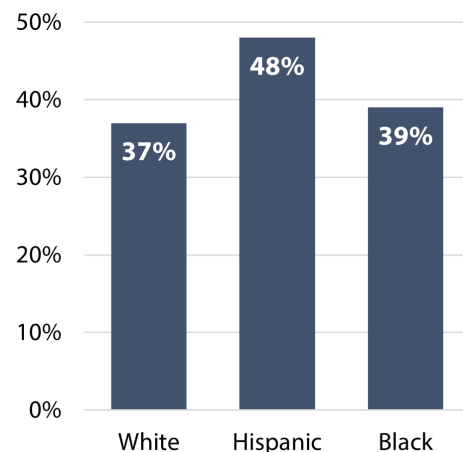
Across different household types, very low food security differed significantly. 50% of working-age households without children and 43% of households with children described experiencing very low food security, while senior-only households were least likely to experience very low food security at 30%. Just over 60% of pantry visitor senior households said they experience food insecurity, compared to around 80% for both households with children and working-age households without children.

These substantial differences in food insecurity rates by household type can likely be accounted for by differences in income and housing situation. Pantry visitor senior households are 2.5 times less likely to live in poverty than working-age households, as shown in the figure below.

**Percent of Dauphin County Pantry Visitors Below the Poverty Level by Household Type**
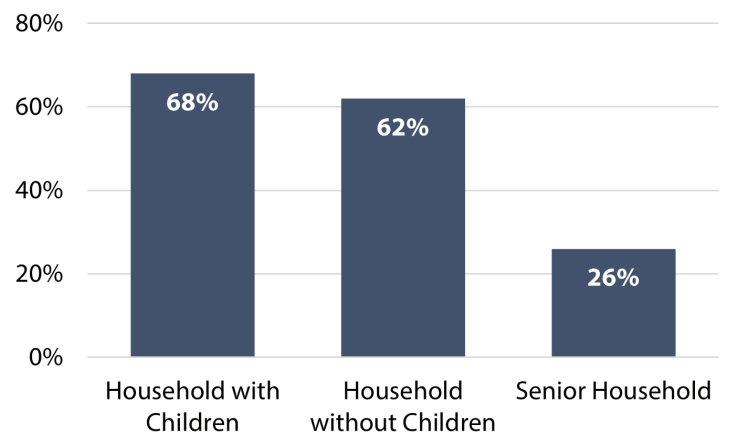


In addition, working-age households without children are far more likely to be sleeping rough, living in a shelter, or staying at someone else's place than other household, and these types of precarious living situations are highly correlated with very low food insecurity in the survey data.

Very low food security rates also strongly correspond with income, as shown in the graph to the right. Half of food pantry visitors with incomes below the poverty level experience very low food security, compared to just over a third (34%) of those with incomes between 100% and 185% of the federal poverty line and slightly more than a fifth (21%) of those above 185% of the poverty threshold.

**Very Low Food Security by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**
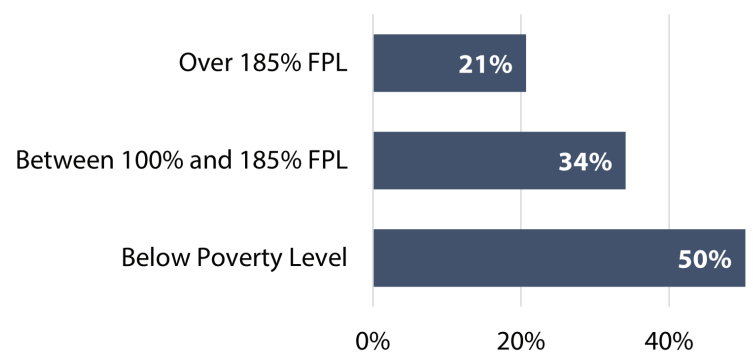
## Food Insecurity Main Findings and Recommendations

**Section 1 Finding 1: One in nine individuals across Dauphin County (11.3%) experienced food insecurity as of 2022.** This rate is slightly lower than the statewide average of 11.9%, but it still equates to more than 32,000 people, including more than 12,000 children. Food insecurity exists in every municipality in Dauphin County, though rates differ significantly across the county.

**Recommendation:** Sustained, collaborative work between many different stakeholders and sectors, including government, nonprofits, and the general public, is required to sufficiently address food insecurity in Dauphin County. Care should be taken to ensure that responses to food insecurity within the county are equitable and correctly tailored to the specific needs of and situation in each community.

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**Section 1 Finding 2: Food insecurity rates are sharply disparate by race and ethnicity in Dauphin County, with Black and Hispanic individuals being between 2.5 and 3 times as likely to face food insecurity than non-Hispanic white individuals.** Food insecurity rates for Hispanic and Black residents of the county stood at 24% and 27% respectively in 2022, while non-Hispanic white individuals had a food insecurity rate of 9%.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders should be cognizant of the unequal distribution of food insecurity across racial and ethnic groups. Service providers should make every effort to not only address the disparate impacts of food insecurity but also resolve its root causes within Dauphin County's communities.

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**Section 1 Finding 3: Children are 120% more likely to experience food insecurity than adults in Dauphin County; this enormous disparity in food insecurity by age is the second largest in the state, behind only Philadelphia.** Dauphin County has the highest child food insecurity rate in central Pennsylvania. Child food insecurity is consistently higher than adult food insecurity in most counties at a state and national level, but the scale and severity of the difference in Dauphin County is unique.

**Recommendation:** Dauphin County stakeholders should put specific emphasis on ensuring that households with children receive all the support they need to thrive. Stakeholders should support policies such as the expanded CTC, promote programs such as WIC and the National School Lunch Program, and offer child and family-focused charitable food assistance as much as possible.

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**Section 1 Finding 4: Overall food insecurity increased 28% between 2021 and 2022, but the spike was especially steep among children at 34%.** These increases, and the disparity between them, are attributable to the expiration of several key government programs, including the expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC), along with external economic factors such as grocery inflation.

Self-reported food insecurity measures among children also reflect this trend. Findings from a 2023 Commonwealth youth survey show that just over 26% of Dauphin County children worried about running out of food and slightly more than 13% skipped a meal because of family finances in 2023, about double the approximately 12% and 6% rates from 2021.

**Recommendation:** The expanded CTC had a large, measurable impact on child food insecurity both nationally and locally; child food insecurity in Dauphin County dropped 29% between 2020 and 2021, the year in which the program was in effect, before rebounding sharply after it expired. Stakeholders should advocate for the expanded CTC's revival; meanwhile, they should take additional action to support Dauphin County's children via currently available means, including government programs such as WIC, school meals, after-school meals, and summer meals and privately funded charitable food supports for children and families.

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**Section 1 Finding 5: The city of Harrisburg is home to less than a fifth (17%) of the overall population of Dauphin County but nearly a third (30%) of the food insecure population.** Nine of the city's fourteen census tracts fall into the Severe Food Insecurity typology, with food insecurity rates of 15% or more; six of these are outliers within their own category and have food insecurity rates more than 20%.

The census tract covering South Harrisburg (the neighborhood south of Interstate 83) has by far the highest food insecurity rate of any census tract in both Dauphin County and central Pennsylvania at large, at a staggering 37%. More than 2,000 food insecure individuals, or 6% of Dauphin County's total food insecure population, reside in just this census tract.

**Recommendation:** Harrisburg faces the most severe food insecurity situation in central Pennsylvania and stakeholders should therefore have a disproportionately large response in the area. It is critically important that every neighborhood in Harrisburg be able to offer its residents sufficient, equitable access to adequate services. South Harrisburg should be an area of emphasis given its especially dire food insecurity rate.

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**Section 1 Finding 6: More than 40% of Dauphin County food pantry visitors reported that they experience very low food security, meaning they still go without food on a consistent basis.** Very low food security rates are high across Dauphin County, with more than one in three pantry visitors saying that they experience very low food security in every region across the county. Harrisburg food pantry visitors are the most likely to experience very low food security in the county, at 52% compared to 36% in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County and 34% in Rural Dauphin County.

**Recommendation:** The charitable food system should use reducing very low food security as one of its main measures of success and put into place policies and programs that work to increase access to the charitable food system, increase participation in available government programs, and advocate for policies and programs that will increase sufficiency of benefits, income, and economic mobility opportunities.

The charitable food system should work to incorporate short, annual surveys that can measure progress along many dimensions, including accessibility and satisfaction with services, as well as very low food security over time. This can be done with a two-question indicator survey based on the USDA six question food security module that asks whether households are forced to cut or skip meals followed by the frequency with which they do so.

## Strengths of the Dauphin County Charitable Food System

The charitable food system in Dauphin County succeeds at its core mission of reducing hunger across the county, though there is still room to improve. Charitable food providers are a critical resource, and they have a clear and demonstrable impact on very low food security among Dauphin County's food pantry visitors. Very low food security is a third lower among individuals who visit the charitable food system at least once a month in a year compared to individuals who visit once every three months or less.

Because the charitable food system is effective in reducing lived experiences of hunger, stakeholders must ensure the charitable food system is accessible, welcoming, and useful to everyone who may need it. The Dauphin County charitable food network displays three major strengths that increase its accessibility and utility to the neighbors it serves.

First, there is excellent geographic access to pantries across most of Dauphin County. The maximum number of food insecure individuals per pantry within a 15-minute drive by census tract is less than half the maximum number of food insecure individuals per pantry for census tracts in neighboring counties,[10,11] and there are very few substantial geographic access gaps.

In addition, choice pantry access is robust in most areas of the county. Choice pantries reduce waste and increase the likelihood that people receive food they like "often or always."[12] Increasing choice is a best practice, and regardless of if a pantry can be completely choice, every pantry can work to increase choices in whatever distribution method they employ.

Finally, access to pantries in the evenings and on the weekends is extremely strong across much of the county, especially in comparison to other counties in the region. More than 90% of food insecure individuals in Dauphin County have access to at least a monthly weekend distribution and 96% have access to a weekend distribution within a reasonable distance. This strong slate of pantries offering hours that are outside of a traditional workday makes a major impact in increasing the accessibility of pantries to working households.
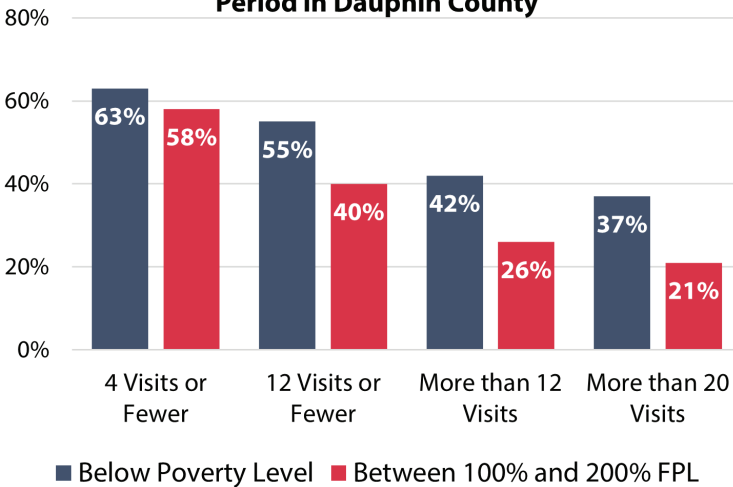
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## IMPACT ON VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY

The charitable food system in Dauphin County has a substantial, measurable impact on very low food security. Each visit neighbors make to the charitable food system during the year reduces their likelihood of experiencing very low food security, holding income constant.

Very low food security for households with incomes below the poverty line is 33% lower among those who visit a food pantry more than twelve times, or approximately once a month, than among those who visit four times or fewer. For those under 100% FPL who visit approximately twice a month, or more than 20 times in a year, very low food security rates are 40% lower.

The same pattern holds for households with incomes above the federal poverty line; very low food security is 55% lower among these households if they visit more than twelve times a year rather than four times or fewer and is 64% lower if they visit more than 20 times in a year.

**Very Low Food Security by Income Threshold and Pantry Visit Frequency Over a One-Year Period in Dauphin County**

| | 4 Visits or Fewer | 12 Visits or Fewer | More than 12 Visits | More than 20 Visits |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Below Poverty Level | 63% | 55% | 42% | 37% |
| Between 100% and 200% FPL | 58% | 40% | 26% | 21% |

## PANTRY VISIT FREQUENCY BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE

Since food security is affected by the number of times households visit the charitable food system, visit frequency is an important metric to use when assessing access.

A potential reason that households with children, working-age households without children, Hispanic, and Black households may experience higher rates of very low food security is that they visit the charitable food system less often than senior households and white households. Hispanic food pantry visitors are a larger share of pantry visitors than of the overall population but visit the least frequently, at just 3.7 times on average based on Service Insights electronic pantry service records. Similarly, households with children and working-age households without children visit fewer than four times a year on average; the average is six times a year for senior-only households.

Neighbor survey results corroborate Service Insights data showing that senior households visit pantries the most frequently. 44% of senior-only households reported visiting more than twelve times in a year, while only 37% of households with children and 24% of working-age households without children did the same. Survey data shows that Hispanic households were the most likely to say that they visit food pantries twelve times or fewer annually. Part of the difference is because Hispanic households were more likely to be visiting a pantry for the first time within the last year; however, even when this variable is controlled for, Hispanic households still visited less frequently on average than did Black or white households.

| Dauphin County Pantry Visit Frequency by Household Type and Race/Ethnicity (Oct 2023 to Sep 2024) | |
|---|---|
| Household Type | Number of Visits |
| Households With Children | 3.9 |
| Households without Children | 3.6 |
| Senior-Only Households | 6.0 |
| Asian Head of Household | 5.6 |
| Black Head of Household | 3.8 |
| Hispanic Head of Household | 3.7 |
| White Head of Household | 5.1 |

These differentials in visit frequency likely account for some of the reason senior households have the lowest rates of very low food security and that Hispanic households have the highest very low food security rates among pantry visitors. Visit frequency itself is significantly impacted by a number of factors, including the accessibility of charitable food providers and the experiences that people have when they visit; therefore, differences in these factors for different demographic groups are likely key drivers of the differences seen in pantry utilization across these groups.

## GEOGRAPHIC PANTRY ACCESS

To understand pantry access at a sub-county level, this analysis examines the number of CPFB partners within 15 minutes' drive of each census tract center of population in Dauphin County. The analysis' parameters are limited to food pantries that everyone can access without restrictions based on demographic characteristics such as age or military history. Therefore, youth programs, MilitaryShares, and senior programs, such as CSFP and ElderShare, are not included in the following maps and discussions.
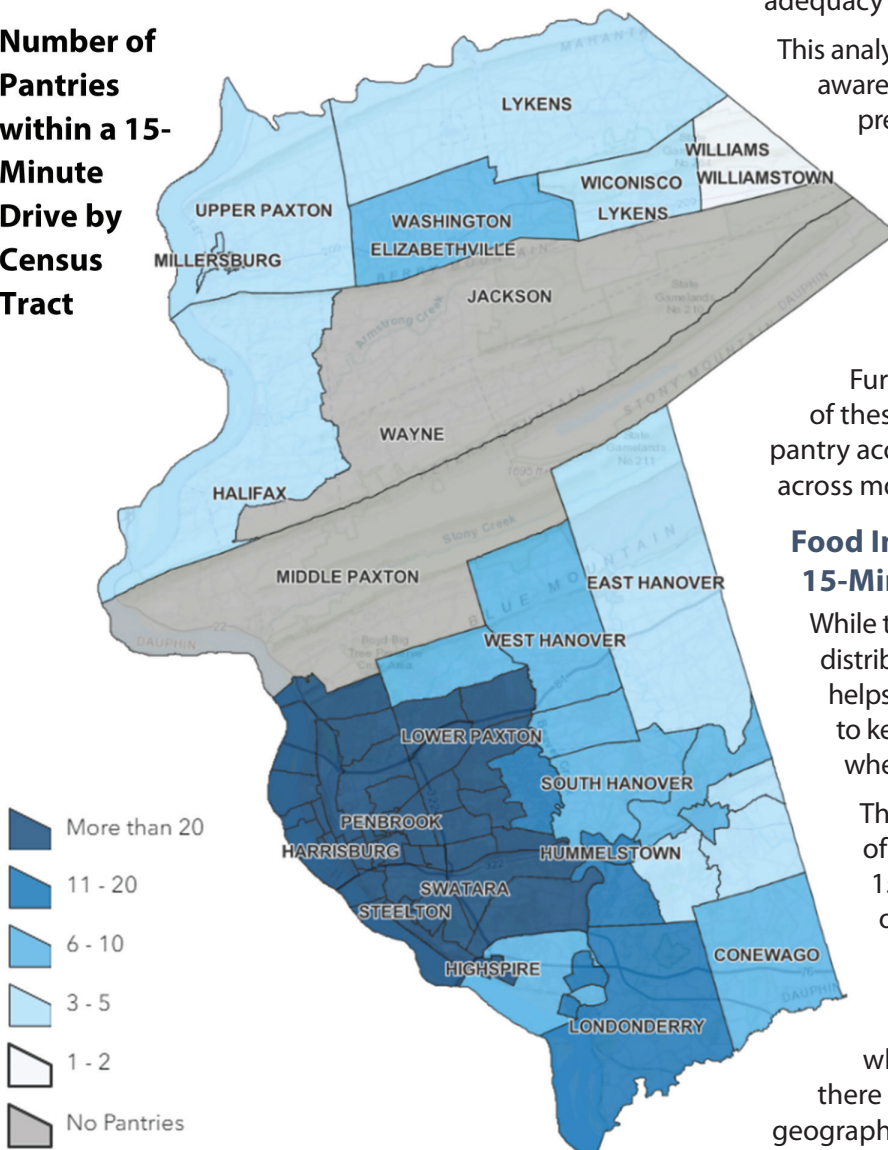
The map below shows that the Harrisburg and the surrounding suburbs (such as Susquehanna, Lower Paxton, and Swatara Townships, as well as Penbrook and Paxtang boroughs) have the densest concentration of pantries in the county, while the areas surrounding Hershey and in northern Dauphin County have significantly fewer pantries.

The two census tracts in central Dauphin County covering Peters Mountain and Blue Mountain completely lack access to a food pantry within a 15-minute drive of the centers of population of these tracts. However, the mountainous nature of these areas may have a dramatic impact on both drive-time and the location of a census tract's center of population so there may be distortions in the access estimates relative to lived experiences as a result.

While this map shows the number of pantries within a reasonable drive time, it does not fully act as a proxy for meaningful access, as agencies may have program restrictions or other constraints that prevent neighbors from accessing their services despite geographic proximity, such as strict service territories, infrequent distribution hours, burdensome paperwork requirements, or limited adequacy of service.

This analysis also does not account for any gaps in awareness of local services; even where services are present, neighbors may not know enough about them to effectively utilize them. As a result, this analysis provides an overestimate of access, so any gaps identified in this analysis, or any subsequent analyses using similar geographic methodologies, should be considered major access gaps.

Further analyses in this report will account for some of these other potential barriers to access. Regardless, pantry access is extremely strong on a geographical basis across most of Dauphin County.

### Food Insecure Individuals Per Pantry within 15-Minute Drive Time

While the map to the left effectively illustrates the distribution of pantries throughout the county and helps highlight areas with fewer pantries, it is important to keep the size of food insecure populations in mind when determining levels of access.

The map on the following page shows the number of food insecure individuals per pantry within a 15-minute drive time of each census tract's center of population. This metric is a useful tool in assessing the approximate number of food insecure individuals each pantry might be expected to serve and can help identify areas where service adequacy might be limited because there is a very large number of neighbors who have geographic access to only one or a few pantries.

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



Legend:
- More than 20
- 11 - 20
- 6 - 10
- 3 - 5
- 1 - 2
- No Pantries

**27**

**Number of Food Insecure Persons per Pantry within a 15-Minute Drive, Dauphin County**



Legend:
◄ > 300
◄ 150
◄ < 0
▨ No Pantries in 15-Min Drive Time
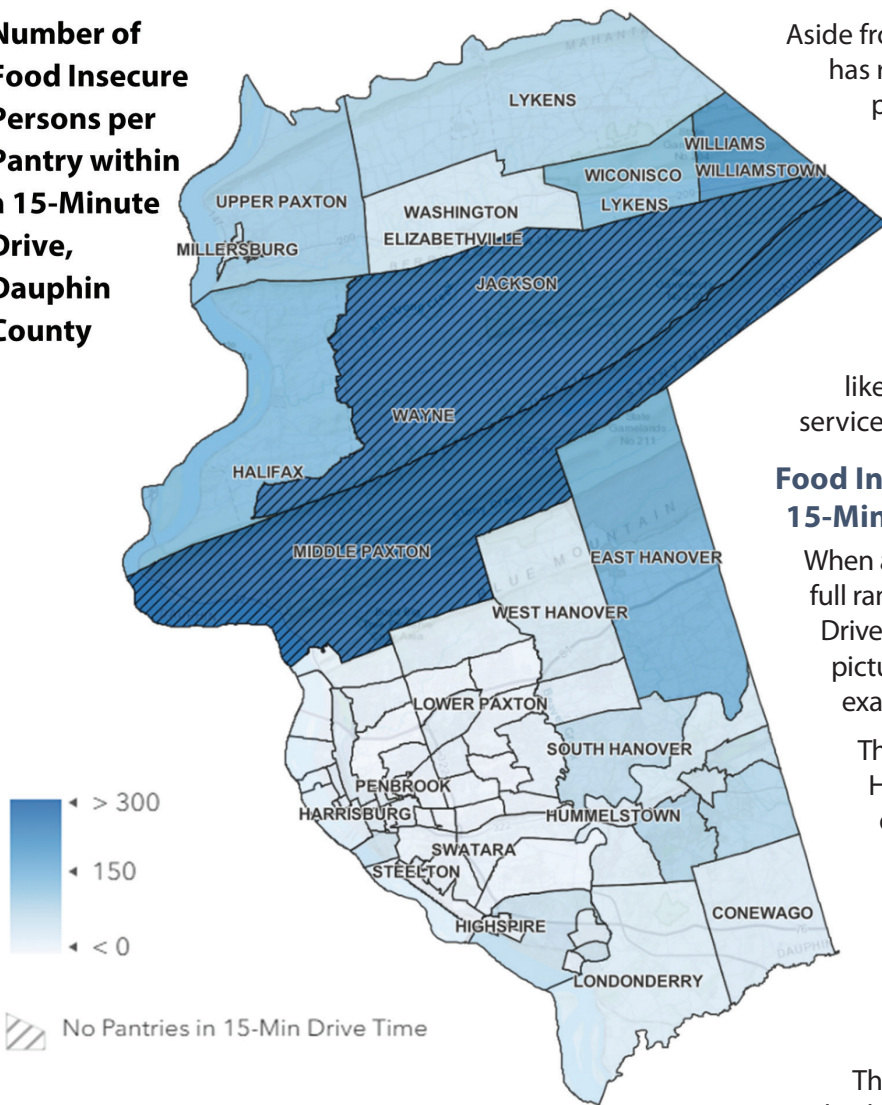
The results of this analysis show that much of northern Dauphin County has fairly large numbers of food insecure individuals per food pantry, with the Halifax, Upper Paxton, Wiconisco, and Williamstown areas having between 120 and 225 individuals per pantry. However, these ratios of food insecure individuals to food pantries are still relatively low compared to similar regions in other counties, including Lancaster, Union, and Snyder.

The two census tracts with hatching are the two mountainous census tracts identified as having no local pantry access; the Jackson/Wayne census tract has 290 food insecure individuals, while the Middle Paxton Township census tract has 610 food insecure individuals. As explained previously, the access gaps in these areas likely overstate access issues because of the mountainous nature of these census tracts.

Aside from East Hanover Township's census tract (which has roughly 170 food insecure individuals per pantry), the southern census tracts in the county all have fewer than 100 food insecure individuals per food pantry, with Harrisburg and its surrounding suburbs having the smallest numbers of food insecure individuals per pantry in a 15-minute drive. Given the substantial food insecure population in Harrisburg, the capacity of those pantries is likely a bigger determinant of the adequacy of services than geographic access.

### Food Insecure Individuals Per Pantry within 15-Minute Walk Time

When assessing geographic access to food pantries, the full range of transportation means must be considered. Drive-time analyses do not capture the complete picture of access for individuals who lack a vehicle, for example.
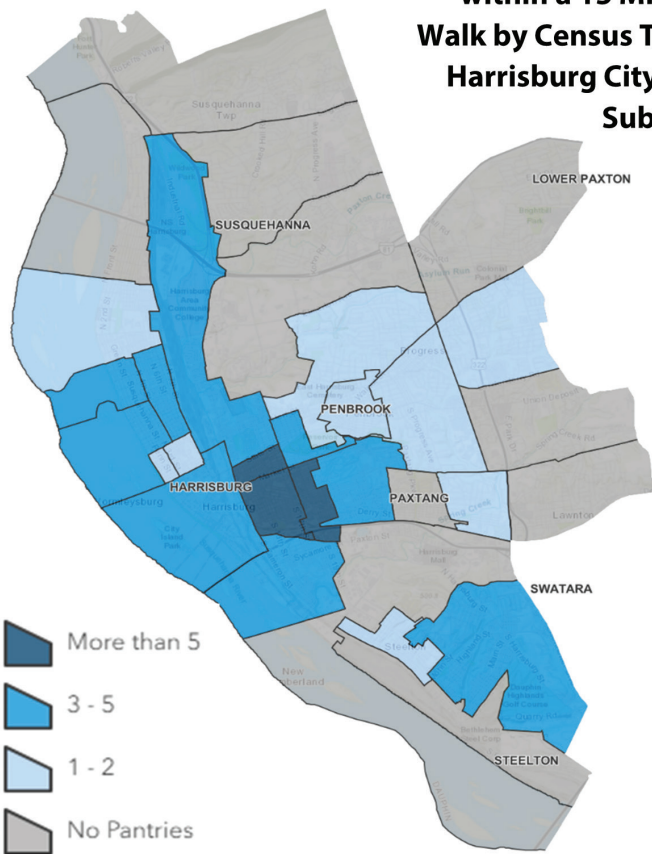
This is particularly pertinent in and around Harrisburg, as nearly a (24%) quarter of households do not have vehicle access in the city according to ACS estimates. Therefore, this report conducts walk-time analyses to gain a more nuanced understanding of where pantry access gaps may exist. This analysis is focused on Harrisburg and the surrounding area, where vehicle access rates are lowest.

The map of Harrisburg City and its immediate suburbs on the following page shows the number of pantries neighbors in each census tract can reach within a 15-minute walk from the tract center of population. Much of Harrisburg, including Downtown, Midtown, Allison Hill, and the southeastern edge of Uptown has good access to pantries by foot.

However, there are distinct walking access gaps in parts of Susquehanna Township, Lower Paxton Township, Steelton, and Paxtang where pantries within walking distance do not exist. Of these, the census tracts covering Lower Paxton Township are the only ones that appear to distinctly lack vehicle access and might therefore benefit the most from expanded pantry services in walkable locations.

Like drive-time analyses, walk-time analysis alone does not account for other barriers to access beyond geography, such as hours, service restrictions, and more. Individuals who visit pantries on foot may face additional barriers specific to this method of transportation, such as a lack of or inadequate pedestrian infrastructure, physical challenges carrying food home, and poor or unpredictable weather conditions creating difficulty in visiting the pantry. The analysis and discussion in this report will account for some, but not all, of these factors.

**Number of Pantries within a 15 Minute Walk by Census Tract, Harrisburg City and Suburbs**

It is important to note that these gaps should not yet be used for decision-making across the county, as many of the gaps are likely due to uneven rollout of the SIMC electronic neighbor intake data system across the county. Many of the gaps appear in places where the local pantries are not on SIMC, so these gaps may be highlighting areas covered by pantries without SIMC rather than actual service gaps. This is very likely to be true of the gaps in the eastern and central portions of the county, where there were no SIMC pantries as of the time of this analysis. However, with additional anonymized data sharing and/or rollout of SIMC in the future, these gap estimates will become the basis for collective decision-making.

The primary exceptions are the two Lower Paxton Township census tracts near the intersection of I-83 and Jonestown Road and the tract surrounding Millersburg borough. These census tracts may have an actual pantry utilization gap because many of the nearby pantries use SIMC for intake, but the number of food insecure individuals still exceeds the number of pantry visitors in these areas.

## Utilization of Food Pantry Services By Census Tract

To estimate the actual utilization of pantries in Dauphin County, the following analysis compares pantry visit data from services rendered between October 2023 and September 2024 by pantries using Service Insights on Meal Connect (SIMC), an electronic neighbor intake tool provided by Feeding America, to food insecurity data at the census tract level for all individuals.

The analysis for food pantry utilization gaps took place in two steps. First, anonymized household data was plotted and assigned to its corresponding census tracts to determine the number of unique individuals in each of Dauphin County's census tracts that were served by a SIMC-user pantry. Then, the number of individuals who visited a SIMC food pantry was subtracted from the total number of food insecure individuals in each census tract as estimated by Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap data model. The final result provides an estimate of the size and locations of pantry utilization gaps across the county.

The map at right shows the final product of this analysis. Based on these results, it appears that there are large gaps in Lower Paxton Township and the Hummelstown and Hershey areas in southern Dauphin County. In central and northern Dauphin county, sizable gaps are present in Middle Paxton and Upper Paxton townships as well as the Halifax area. Smaller gaps appear in the far south of the county.

**Pantry Utilization Gap for Food Insecure Population, Dauphin County**

**(Oct. 2023 – Sept. 2024)**



*Number of Food Insecure Individuals who have not visited a pantry*
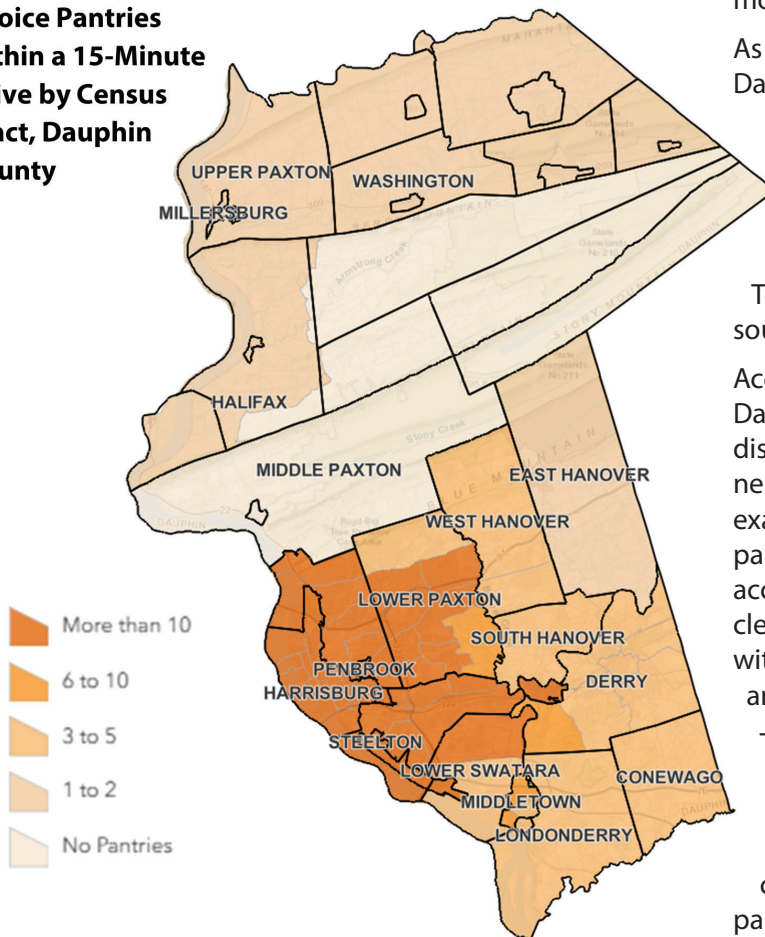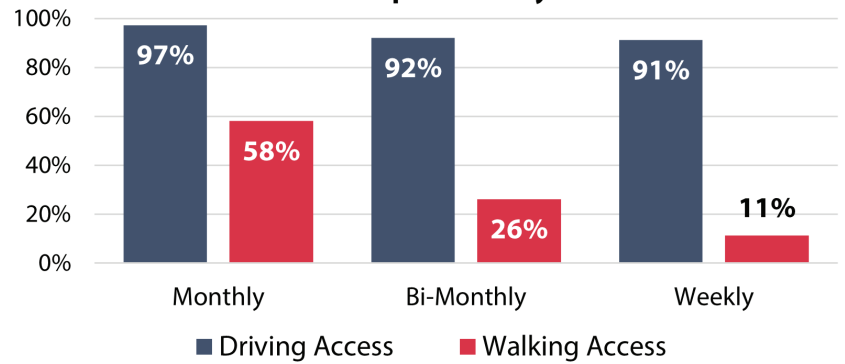
29
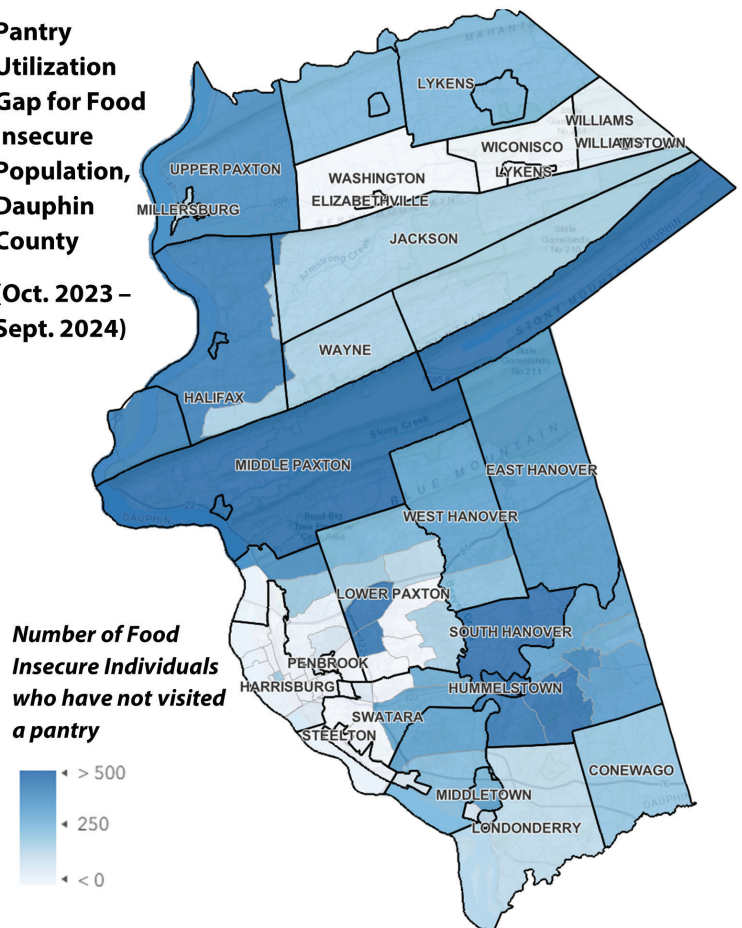
## CHOICE PANTRY AVAILABILITY

Choice shopping models add a degree of dignity and autonomy to the neighbor experience. Providing neighbors with greater choice allows them to select foods that align with their culture, health restrictions, and dietary needs. According to one partner at a listening session, "People seem to appreciate being able to self-select their product, they keep coming back." Choice models have lower reported food waste and a greater percentage of visitors who say that pantries "always" or "often" have food they like, making choice models a more efficient way to manage pantry resources as well.

Choice pantry access, as measured by the availability of a choice pantry within a 15-minute drive time radius of each census tract's center of population, is strong throughout much of Dauphin County. More than 90% of the food insecure population in Dauphin County has access to a choice pantry within driving distance that is open on a weekly basis or more.

**Access to Choice Pantries by Means of Transportation, Dauphin County**



Driving Access — Walking Access

Monthly: Driving 97%, Walking 58%
Bi-Monthly: Driving 92%, Walking 26%
Weekly: Driving 91%, Walking 11%

The maps in this section include all choice pantries regardless of distribution frequency, as doing so provides the most general view of access in Dauphin County. As shown in the map at left, Harrisburg and its immediate suburbs have the most access to choice pantries within a 15-minute drive. Excluding East Hanover Township, all of the census tracts south of Middle Paxton Township have local access to three or more choice pantries. The majority of census tracts in and directly outside of Harrisburg have more than ten choice pantries nearby.

As is the case with access to pantries in general, northern Dauphin County is different from southern Dauphin County. Choice access is much more limited in northern Dauphin County. There are no census tracts north of Middle Paxton Township with local access to more than two choice pantries. The mountainous and less populated census tracts that cover Middle Paxton Township and form the division between northern and southern Dauphin County, have no nearby choice pantries.

**Choice Pantries within a 15-Minute Drive by Census Tract, Dauphin County**



Access to choice pantries is more than adequate in Dauphin County for neighbors who are able to drive to distributions. However, it is more limited for those neighbors without access to transportation. When examining the census tracts in Dauphin County and particularly in Harrisburg and its surrounding areas for access to choice pantries within a 15-minute walk time, it is clear that choice pantries are only accessible to pedestrians within the city of Harrisburg and the suburbs in Penbrook and Swatara Township.

There are several census tracts with no walkable access to choice pantries in Lower Paxton Township, Susquehanna Township, Steelton, and Paxtang. Furthermore, only 58% of food insecure individuals countywide have walkable access to at least one choice pantry open monthly; this proportion decreases significantly when looking only at choice pantries that distribute on a more frequent basis, such as twice a month or more often. Overall, choice pantry access appears to be a strength for the charitable food system in Dauphin County, but substantial limitations remain for neighbors who must walk to distributions.

## PANTRY HOURS AND DISTRIBUTION DAYS

Local access to pantries with evening or weekend hours varies by location throughout Dauphin County. The following analysis identifies areas within the county where evening and weekend access by car and on food is most limited and where efforts to extend hours may have the biggest impact on food insecurity.

Overall, access to evening and weekend pantries is excellent for Dauphin County neighbors with vehicle access. A total of 96% of food insecure neighbors have local access to a pantry with evening hours within a 15-minute drive, which is very high compared to other counties where community hunger mapping has been completed.[13,14,15] The proportion is somewhat smaller for access to weekend pantries at 90%, although this is still quite high.

**Access to Evening & Weekend Distributions within a 15-Minute Drive, Dauphin County**



Legend: ■ Evening Access  ■ Weekend Access
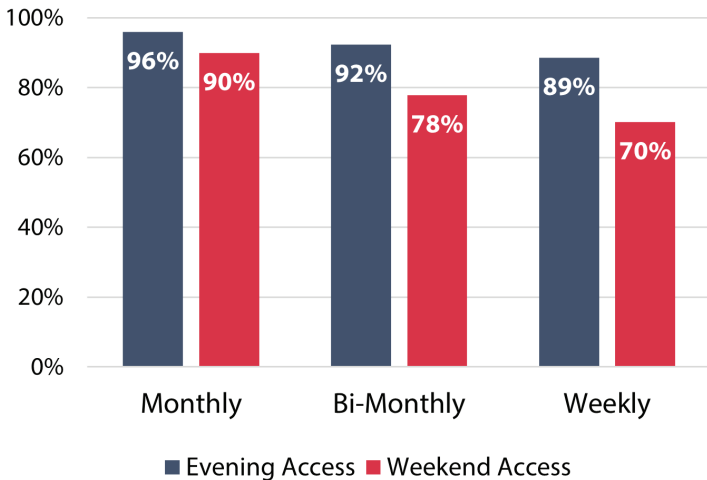
Another component of access is the frequency with which pantries with evening or weekend hours are open during a month. The aforementioned weekend and evening access figures are for pantries which distribute at least once a month, but access remains strong even among pantries that distribute more frequently. For evening pantries, access is still at 92% when limiting the analysis to pantries that distribute twice a month or more, and it only drops to 89% for pantries that distribute at least once a week. Weekend pantries have a more distinct drop-off, to 78% among those that are open at least twice a month and 70% when focusing pantries that distribute at least weekly. With that said, most of Dauphin County neighbors with vehicle access can still consistently reach pantries that distribute during evenings or weekends on a weekly basis.

Because the census tracts along Peters Mountain and including Wiconisco Township do not have a pantry in a 15-minute drive, they also have no access to pantries that offer evening hours. The census tracts directly north and west of them, which include Halifax, Elizabethville, and Lykens, have no more than two local pantries with evening hours.

South of the mountain, the census tracts containing Highspire and in the Hershey area have two or fewer pantries that are open in the evenings.

When narrowing the analysis to include only those pantries with weekly or more frequent distributions, only the Harrisburg area and its immediate eastern suburbs have more than three local pantries with evening hours.

Turning to weekend hours, the map on below shows that northern Dauphin County again has the most opportunities to increase access to weekend pantries, though there are a few opportunities in southern Dauphin County as well.

Notably, Elizabethville and Lykens do not have weekend distributions and weekend access is limited across much of the rest of northern Dauphin County. Again, the same census tracts along Peters Mountain and in Wiconisco Township that lack evening pantries also have no local access to weekend distributions.

In lower Dauphin County, a large portion of Lower Swatara Township, a sizable chunk of southern Derry Township, and the entirety of Conewago Township, do not have a pantry offering weekend hours within a 15-minute time frame.

### Weekend Pantries within a 15-Minute Drive by Census Tract, Dauphin County



31
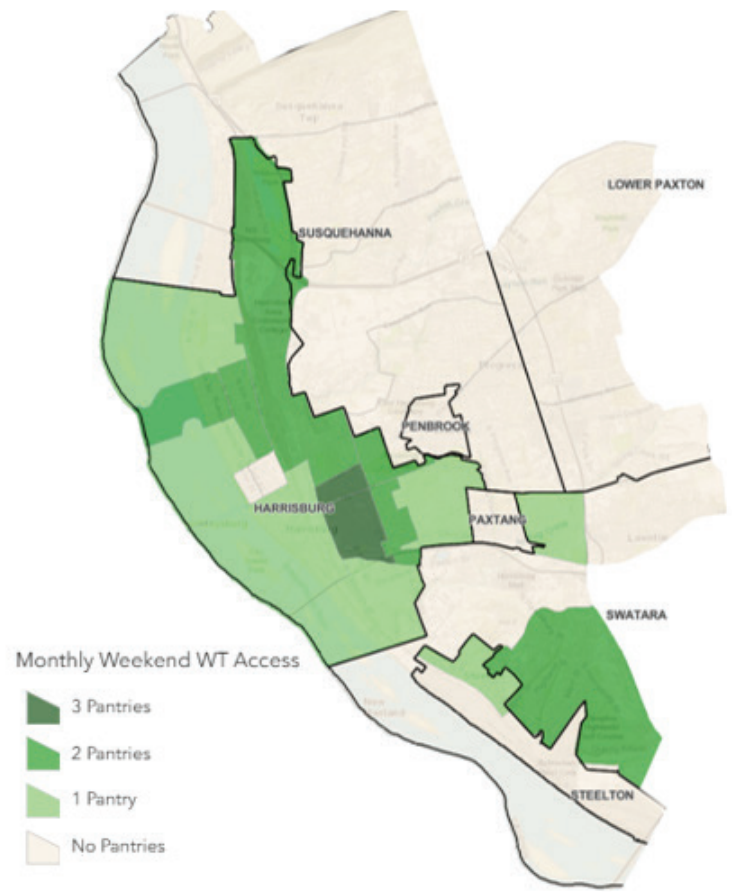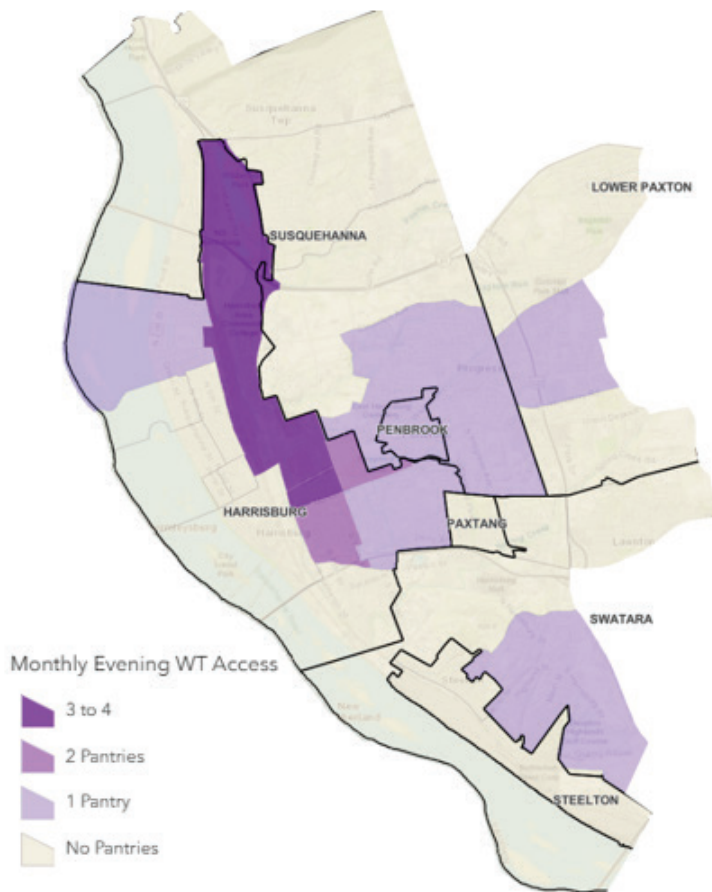
Consistent with the findings around evening hours, only Harrisburg and its inner suburbs have access to more than three pantries that are open on weekends. While off-hours access is robust for most Dauphin County neighbors with vehicle access, the landscape changes significantly for neighbors that rely on walking or public transportation to visit pantries. This is notable for Harrisburg especially, as Harrisburg accounts for a large portion of the food insecure population in Dauphin County and is the area where vehicle access is lowest and walkable services are most needed.

Among food insecure neighbors in the Harrisburg area, almost half (49%) have access to pantries that are open at least one evening a month, and three quarters (75%) have access to pantries that run weekend distributions at least monthly.

When narrowing the analysis to only include pantries with, at minimum, twice a month or weekly distributions, access drops steeply. For evening access, the proportion of neighbors with access to pantries distributing at least twice a month is only one in five (19%), and it drops all the way to one in 25 (4%) when only including pantries that distribute on one or more evenings a week. The proportion of neighbors with local access to weekend distributions drops to less than half at 44% when including only pantries open at least two weekends a month and 0% for weekly weekend distributions.

The above walk-time analysis maps both focus on the monthly frequency of distribution as there is a clear need to increase walkable access to off-hours distributions across all frequency levels. Looking at evening distributions, all of Downtown, Midtown, the southern parts of Uptown, and Steelton are without walkable access to pantries with evening distributions.

For walkable access to weekend distributions, the census tract along the Susquehanna River in Steelton, Progress and Penbrook boroughs, the census tract in Swatara Township that includes the Harrisburg Mall, and the census tracts east of 7th Street in Midtown from Forster to Reilly Street are all without walkable access to weekend distributions. The remaining census tracts are within walking distance of at most four pantries with weekend hours; most tracts have only one or two.

*"It's hard because all pantries fall on the same day and I can only come to one."*

*– Pantry Visitor*

## Opportunities for Growth in the Dauphin County Charitable Food System

### PANTRY VOLUNTEER AND STAFF TREATMENT

The Dauphin County Community Hunger Mapping project is the most comprehensive assessment of the charitable food network in any county in central Pennsylvania to date. In addition to conducting surveys at twelve geographically and demographically representative pantry sites, CPFB researchers visited 37 additional partner agencies and programs whose services are open to the public to learn as much as possible about how pantries offer assistance and how neighbors go about getting this help.

Pantries and pantry workers across Dauphin County were generally friendly and welcoming. Many organizations with long-time volunteers had clearly established rapport with neighbors visiting their distribution. This was true for both smaller pantries offering relatively limited services and the larger organizations which see hundreds of neighbors over the course of a month.

Many of the more than 300 survey comments expressed positive views and experiences of charitable food providers and volunteers. One survey participant felt that the volunteers are like neighbors and friends, saying, "They're gracious and kind. I love that." Others expressed their gratitude for the help from fellow members of the community. Some neighbors provided specific examples, such as instances when volunteers listened to understand their experiences and for pantry workers who treated the work they do as a meaningful and vital community service.

If conflict did arise at a pantry, it was almost always due to one of three types of issues:

1. **Stigma and judgment,** where there is a disconnect between what volunteers believe about neighbors and the experiences and attitudes neighbors have about themselves and the reasons why they visit a food pantry. In this context, asking for help as a "client" or offering help as a volunteer sometimes creates an unequal power dynamic that is difficult for both parties to navigate;

2. **Compliance practices** that are enforced inappropriately, inconsistently, or designed for the convenience of the volunteers rather than reflective of established regulations or the needs of neighbors; and

3. **Language barriers** between volunteers and neighbors, which make individual pantry rules and expectations difficult or impossible for neighbors to follow.

### JUDGMENT, STIGMA, AND CONFLICT AT FOOD PANTRIES

Neighbors describe food pantries as being easier to access and more welcoming than other social service providers.[16] Because food resources are generally more available than other types of assistance (such as help with rent), a family might visit a pantry to stretch money that would have been in the food budget to go to other necessary bills. For some households, this may mean visiting a pantry once or twice per month or visiting more than one pantry to acquire enough food.

Listening sessions with partner agencies, survey and observation visits, and regular conversation with staff and volunteers at pantries across Dauphin County suggest that food insecurity as a concept is not well understood by many pantry volunteers. Most volunteers identify participation in food distribution as simply a positive way to give back to their community. They are not necessarily aware of their role in the "charitable food network" and may not see their organization's distribution as a crucial food resource for their community. Volunteers frequently say they "like doing a nice thing for people" at a pantry which is a primary and very needed support for that neighborhood or community. This understanding, or lack thereof, leads to a disconnect between how neighbors and pantry volunteers view the purpose of their pantry.

This disconnect can create problems on both sides. Neighbors who take extra items or visit the pantry frequently may be seen as "taking advantage" by a volunteer. Conversely, a neighbor who is scolded by a volunteer may view this interaction as unfair and rude; a frequent refrain is "they act like the food is coming from their own kitchen." Situations like these can escalate quickly but are usually diffused by experienced volunteers without incident. However, the memory of a negative interaction can have a major influence on people's willingness to visit and volunteer at food pantries, so it is important to address mistakes, misunderstandings, and conflicts before the pantry environment becomes hostile.

The graph at right shows significant variation in the rate of reported feelings of judgment among food pantry visitors by pantry location in Dauphin County from neighbor survey data. Reported rates of judgment ranged from 2.0% to 15.0% of respondents, with overall feelings of judgment averaging 6.5% in Dauphin County pantries. This average rate of judgment is slightly higher than every other county in which Community Hunger Mapping has been conducted.[17,18,19] It should be noted that the rates of judgment described here are likely to be underestimates, as neighbors may be hesitant to share their feelings with researchers. Those who do report feeling judged usually recall very specific and troubling incidents, indicating that those with less specific experiences of judgment may be less likely to share them.

Every interaction a volunteer or pantry staff member has with a neighbor matters. To ensure neighbors have the most positive interactions possible, volunteers and staff should be trained in trauma-informed care and food pantry best practices. Volunteer recruitment and retention was mentioned as a major challenge for partners in carrying out vital pantry services. Negative interactions can be stressful for volunteers and staff as well; these trainings would help pantries sustain volunteers by equipping them with an understanding of how food insecurity impacts individuals and communities and providing strategies to mitigate stressful situations in the pantry.

As a first step toward implementation work, CPFB researchers review pantry-level survey findings with each participating pantry. This is done to share the results and to gather additional information and feedback, as well as to support strategies to address the concerns of neighbors as part of the Community Hunger Mapping process. Pantries take their survey results very seriously and often develop solutions or request additional resources as needed.

**Percent of Surveyed Pantries by Range of Reported Feelings of Judgment**
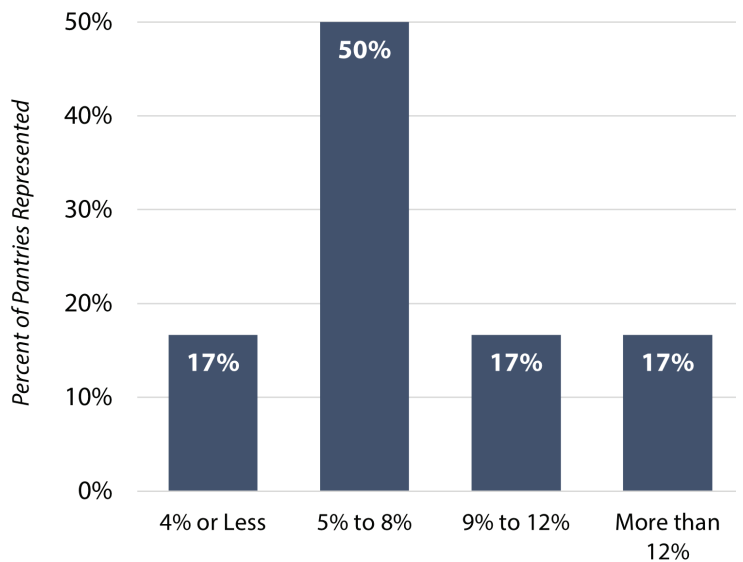


*Reported Feelings of Judgment among Pantry Visitors*

*"I still feel bad about it" citing an incident where a young man with disbabilities was waiting in line for 30+ minutes and then was sent home without receiving food because he didn't have his ID. "I gave him one of my bags."*

*– Pantry Visitor*

## Intake Practices and Compliance

Nearly all food pantries that are partner agencies of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank receive free, federally funded products through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). In Pennsylvania, the state-funded State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) provides support to the charitable food system via grants or in-kind food provision to many TEFAP-participant agencies. Food pantries and their communities benefit from TEFAP and SFPP by having access to free and nutritious products and additional funding, but the programs come with some regulatory requirements. These requirements are most visible at pantries during the registration process. One time per fiscal year, households are required to complete a "Self-Declaration of Need" form in which they must report the number of people in their household and attest to whether the household's income is under 185% of the federal poverty line for its size. As of 2024, this threshold is $57,700 for a family of four.[20]

The USDA and Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture also set regulations about what forms of proof of address, identity, and income are required. At present, those regulations allow pantries to ask the person completing the Self-Declaration of Need for identification but stipulate that it cannot be required, meaning that a pantry could use a visitor's driver's license to ensure accuracy in the spelling of names and addresses, but cannot use a lack of ID as a reason to refuse services to a household. Requiring other forms of proof of address, identity, income, or verification of household members is not allowed.[21]

During surveys and observation visits, some pantries were noted to have restrictive documentation requirements for neighbors that go beyond the allowable practices from USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Though it is never allowable to request birth certificates, leases, or Social Security cards, pantries were observed requiring a combination of several or all of these for TEFAP and/or SFPP services. Excessive documentation requirements are not compliant with the regulations as they create additional barriers for neighbors and unnecessary administrative work for staff and volunteers. Inconsistent adherence to basic guidelines creates additional confusion for neighbors navigating a complicated system and arbitrarily establishes barriers in what is meant to be a low barrier system.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, no two pantries are alike. For neighbors, visiting a new pantry can mean learning an entirely new set of rules from volunteers who already understand the process fully. It is important that pantry workers give visitors grace around mistakes and confusion. Simple and efficient intake practices often make the check-in process smoother for volunteers and neighbors, reducing confusion and stress during busy food distributions. Such practices are also the most likely to be aligned with regulations from USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, as well as the civil rights rules pantries must adhere to as program participants and partner agencies of the Food Bank.

Pantries must make concerted efforts to ensure that their policies and procedures, both at intake and throughout a pantry service, promote positive interactions between pantry visitors, staff, and volunteers so all individuals can navigate pantry spaces with ease. This is a critical step in de-mystifying assistance programs and reducing the stigma around participating in them, which may encourage neighbors to access much-needed resources sooner.

## Children at Food Pantries

CPFB researchers also learned that several pantries in Dauphin County have rules barring children from visiting the pantry with their caregivers. Although children may exhibit unexpected behaviors and require close supervision to ensure their safety, food pantries cannot refuse to serve a household who arrives to the pantry with children, including creating rules that require children must remain outside/in the car while a guardian shops in the pantry. Some pantries intentionally create child-friendly areas for older children to read or color. These pantries must also allow caregivers to decide if the child(ren) use the space. Since households with children are disproportionately likely to face food insecurity in Dauphin County, pantries must remove burdensome, unnecessary rules and barriers that limit how caregivers can access pantries.

## Food Safety

Another aspect of compliance practices involves food safety. CPFB researchers found that nearly all Dauphin County partner agencies adhered closely to food safety guidelines, taking care with refrigerated items and tossing spoiled or damaged food as it was discovered.

Some well-intentioned agencies were found to be separating multi-packs of some individually wrapped items, like fruit cups, juice boxes, and taco shells, into smaller groups to "stretch" the amount and variety of food that could be shared with neighbors. Separating individually packaged items in this way does not violate food safety standards if interior packaging remains sealed and all items have the relevant nutritional information. Pantries who conduct this sort of separation should take care to ensure that nutrition labels are retained and that ingredient and allergy information is packaged with items so that neighbors have the information they need to be able to make safe, informed choices about pantry items.

Though many pantries are aware that repackaging bulk items like spices, flour, sugar, prepared foods, and meat is a much more complex process that must be completed in specialized prep and storage areas for food safety reasons, some pantries were still observed to be repacking products despite lacking the infrastructure needed to do so safely. While it is tempting to split a large pack of items like frozen meat into smaller portions, doing so exponentially increases the potential risks to neighbors when the standards needed to ensure food safety are not met. Alternatively, programs can offer those items as-is to large families or, in the case of retail donations, share with community meal programs who can use bulk items immediately. Both options maintain adequate levels of food safety and limit food waste.



Most people would pass on an unmarked bag of miscellaneous items or an unlabeled can in a regular grocery store; pantries should strive for a similar standard. Neighbors should not be made to feel as though they are only receiving food meant for the dumpster or that they do not have a choice in taking food that may appear to be of questionable quality or origin.

## Pantry Models and Changes at Pantries Over Time

CPFB researchers spoke with several neighbors who have visited their pantry over the course of several years and experienced changes to pantry operations over the course of the pandemic related to health guidance at the time. Agencies truly rose to the challenge of continuing to serve their communities and they take pride in the innovations that allowed them to persist in their missions at such a difficult time. One agency noted, "It was important to us that we kept choice shopping available for everyone" at a time when most organizations pivoted to contactless or pre-packed food box types of food distribution.

Pantry practices around hygiene and crowded spaces contribute to maintaining a safe environment for everyone, but other changes have persisted, even though their original cause has abated. Many visitors noted that pandemic-related adjustments to frequency of open hours and options for choice shopping remain in place. One neighbor said she "really misses the choice model because it was a very positive experience for [her] autistic son and reduced the amount of food they got that they couldn't use."

## LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY AT PANTRIES

Pantry visitors in Dauphin County speak many different languages. Some agencies shared that there are more than ten languages spoken by the people they serve, including Spanish, Arabic, Nepali, Haitian Creole, and Urdu among others.

In Dauphin County, there were not significant disparities between the reported feelings of judgment among pantry visitors based on the language in which the survey was taken for Spanish-speaking households and English-speaking households, though it should be noted that there was not enough data to include other languages in this analysis. Similarity of judgment by language data is very positive, but language barriers remain a consistent challenge and area of growth for the charitable food network.

CPFB research indicates pantry staff, volunteers, and neighbors all experience frustration with the difficulty of communicating essential information about pantry procedures through a language barrier. The pantry experience can be confusing for households who do not primarily speak English, especially when there are no staff or volunteers available that speak a neighbor's language and pantry procedures are not clearly indicated in ways that are accessible regardless of language. CPFB researchers observed small misunderstandings escalate into tense conflict due to language barriers, and non-English-speaking neighbors have missed out on opportunities to utilize resources at their food pantries because they were not adequately promoted in accessible ways.

"Because I don't speak English, I see there are some people who ask for permission and enter. I want to go in too, but… I don't have a way to communicate to enter," a Spanish-speaking neighbor shared in an interview. "It isn't something that is easy for me because I don't speak English." This neighbor is referring to a non-food service that is offered at her food pantry that she wants to participate in. Without an understanding of how to ask for it or if there are eligibility criteria, the service feels "controlled."

All neighbors must be set up to have a successful and easily navigable pantry experience. CPFB can assist by providing Self-Declaration of Need forms in many languages. Having translated forms for non-English speaking communities visiting pantries simplifies intake processes. Additional translated materials and grace for households whose first language is not English are needed to reduce confusion, conflict, and feelings of judgment. Because Spanish is the most commonly spoken non-English language among food pantry visitors, some pantries have created Spanish 'scripts' to communicate key terms and conversation items with neighbors.

Images are also a very effective method of communicating ideas or instructions to people of all language backgrounds, especially when symbols people would universally understand regardless of their primary language or literacy level are used to denote important information, like food groups or walking directions. Some pantries CPFB researchers visited have excellent visual directions meant to make the process easier to navigate. Having translated or otherwise accessible signs indicating pantry procedures and the number of items that can be chosen from a shelf can prevent confusion for everyone in the food pantry.

Language accessibility is a priority issue for charitable food providers in Dauphin County, as indicated by the high number of agencies who shared that they need Spanish-speaking volunteers in listening sessions. Pantries can and should work to increase the number of Spanish-speaking volunteers through outreach with the wider community. Key areas for recruiting Spanish-speaking volunteers include local businesses, colleges and high schools, and Spanish-speaking church congregations. Pantries have shared that they have also been successful finding volunteers on neighborhood social media platforms.
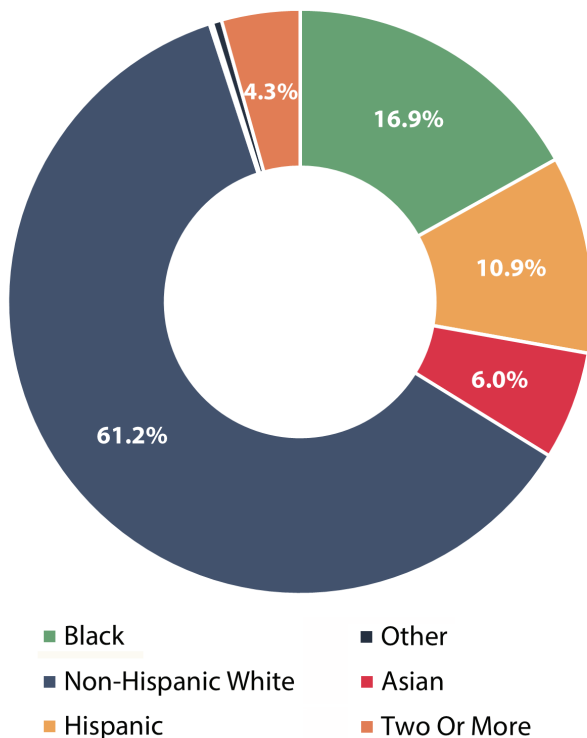
## RACE, ETHNICITY, AND ANCESTRY ACROSS DAUPHIN COUNTY

Another component of access is the availability of foods that are relevant to the people who utilize the charitable food system. This section represents the first of many needed steps to help food pantries provide foods that meet the preferences and needs of all neighbors.
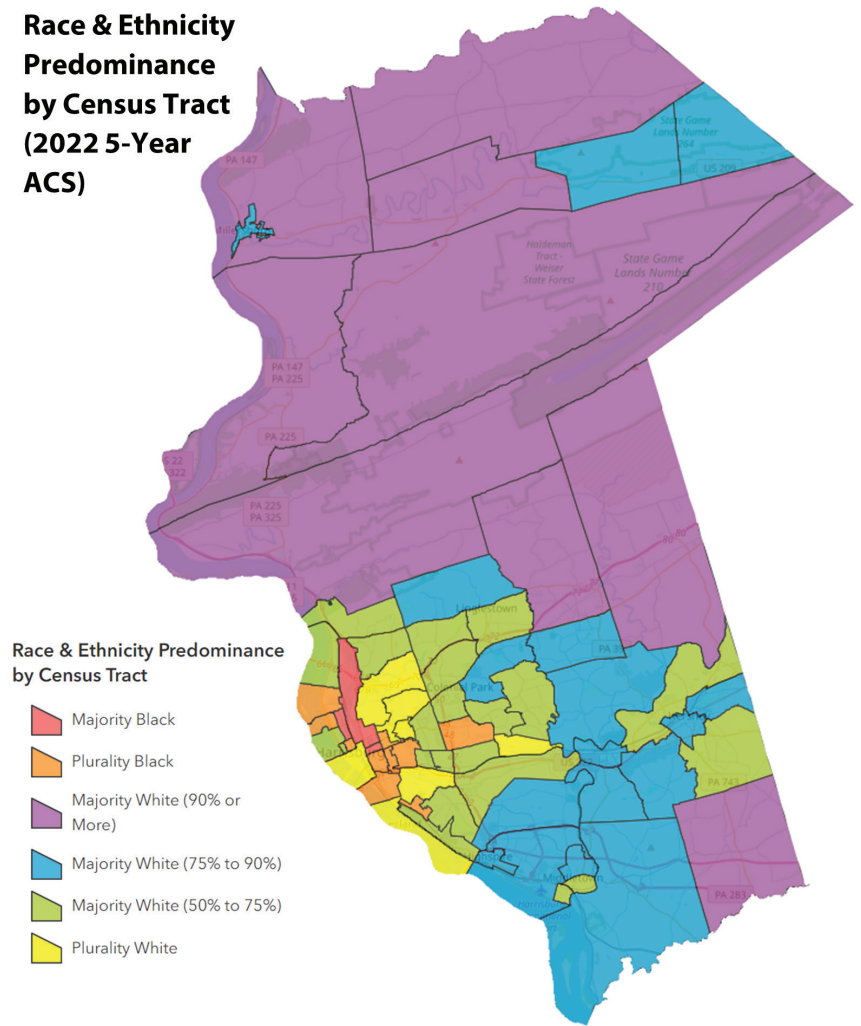
This effort is highly important because Dauphin County is, like the rest of the United States, becoming increasingly more diverse in its racial and ethnic populations. Dauphin County's Hispanic population grew 66% between the 2010 and 2020 decennial Censuses, increasing from 7.0% to 10.9% of the county population. In total, there are more than 30,000 Hispanic individuals in Dauphin County. The county's Asian community has also grown rapidly since 2010 – it has more than doubled from about 8,500 individuals to more than 17,000 and now represents 6.0% of the population of the county.

The Black community in Dauphin County grew at a slower pace, increasing 4.5% from about 46,000 to about 48,000 individuals, but it remains the second-largest racial or ethnic group at about 17% of the county's population. The only racial or ethnic group that did not grow in population in Dauphin County during this time was non-Hispanic white, which dropped 6.5%, though white individuals still make up the majority at just over 60% of the countywide population.

**Race & Ethnicity Predominance by Census Tract (2022 5-Year ACS)**



Race & Ethnicity Predominance by Census Tract

- Majority Black
- Plurality Black
- Majority White (90% or More)
- Majority White (75% to 90%)
- Majority White (50% to 75%)
- Plurality White

### Race and Ethnicity in Dauphin County by Census Tract

Dauphin County's different racial and ethnic groups are not evenly dispersed across the county. The map above shows the predominant race or ethnicity by census tract as of 2022 5-Year ACS estimates. Of the county's 67 census tracts, 48 (72%) are majority non-Hispanic white, and another six (9%) are plurality white, meaning white, non-Hispanic households are not the majority but represent the largest group. The remaining 13 tracts are either plurality Black (10 tracts, or 15%) or majority Black (3 tracts, or 5%). There are no census tracts in the county in which the predominant group is Hispanic, Asian, or any other race or ethnicity.

Because of the number of majority non-Hispanic white census tracts, this analysis separates this category out by the size of the majority: purple signifies a more than 90% majority, blue represents a majority between 75% and 90%, and green indicates a majority between 50% and 75%. Yellow areas have no majority, but the largest single group in those tracts is non-Hispanic white. Orange areas also have no majority, but the largest single group is Black, and red areas are majority Black.

**Proportion of Countywide Population by Race/Ethnicity in Dauphin County, 2020 Census**



- 16.9%
- 10.9%
- 6.0%
- 4.3%
- 61.2%

- Black
- Other
- Non-Hispanic White
- Asian
- Hispanic
- Two Or More

| Race/Ethnicity Predominance by Census Tract and Food Insecurity Typology by Census Tract, Dauphin County (2022 ACS and MMG) | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Race/Ethnicity Predominance | Total CTs | # of Severe FI CTs | % Severe FI CTs | # of High FI CTs | % High FI CTs | # of Moderate FI CTs | % Moderate FI CTs | # of Lower FI CTs | % Lower FI CTs |
| Majority Black | 3 | 3 | 100% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Plurality Black | 10 | 5 | 50% | 2 | 20% | 3 | 30% | 0 | 0% |
| Majority White (90% or More) | 9 | 0 | 0% | 3 | 33% | 5 | 59% | 1 | 11% |
| Majority White (75-90%) | 17 | 2 | 12% | 7 | 41% | 1 | 9% | 7 | 41% |
| Majority White (50-75%) | 22 | 4 | 18% | 4 | 18% | 7 | 32% | 7 | 32% |
| Plurality White | 6 | 1 | 17% | 2 | 33% | 1 | 17% | 2 | 33% |
| *County Total* | *67* | *15* | *22%* | *18* | *27%* | *17* | *25%* | *17* | *25%* |

Heavily majority white (greater than 90%) areas are concentrated in the more rural areas of the county. Areas with smaller, but still substantial non-Hispanic white majorities (between 75% and 90%) include the area around Williamstown and Lykens, Millersburg borough, and many of Harrisburg's outer suburban areas, as well as most of the Hershey area within Derry Township.

Nearer to Harrisburg are areas with slimmer majorities (between 50% and 75%) and pluralities, including: Susquehanna Township, much of Lower Paxton Township, Penbrook, Paxtang, Swatara Township, and part of Middletown Borough, as well as parts of Midtown Harrisburg. Majority Black tracts lie exclusively in the City of Harrisburg, covering parts of Allison Hill, Midtown, and Uptown. Plurality Black tracts lie mostly adjacent to these majority Black tracts within the city.

Plurality and Majority Black census tracts show disproportionate rates and severity of food insecurity; an analysis of race/ethnicity predominance along with food insecurity typology reveals that all three Majority Black tracts are also Severe Food Insecurity tracts (defined as census tracts with food insecurity rates of 15% or more) as are five of the ten Plurality Black tracts. Of the 54 remaining tracts, which are either Majority or Plurality non-Hispanic white, just seven, or 13%, fall into the Severe Food Insecurity typology. More information about drivers of food insecurity by race and ethnicity is in the Intersecting and Upstream Issues section of this report.

## NON-WESTERN EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

Understanding ancestry and working toward increasing access to culturally familiar foods for an ethnically diverse community are worthwhile efforts on their own merits and because people who are part of historically marginalized communities are disproportionately likely to be food insecure. This analysis uses U.S. Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data to shed light on areas that have concentrated populations of people of non-Western European descent as a first step towards work on topics like culturally familiar food sourcing and cultural competency within the charitable food network.

It is essential to note that Hispanic and Asian populations, and all racial and ethnic groups, are not monoliths 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 examines the different national ancestries in Dauphin County using data from the 2022 5-Year ACS.

Ancestry data within the ACS and Census derives from a sub-question of the race and ethnicity question in which individuals may specify their ancestry by country. This introduces several limitations within the data, foremost of which is that, due to the horrific legacy of the Atlantic slave trade, African American individuals are generally unable to trace their ancestry to a specific country or region. There is, therefore, a systemic data gap that leads to an inability to represent individuals who have African ancestry but who are not foreign-born or the descendants of relatively recent immigrants in nationality-based ancestry analysis.

| Selected Non-Western European National Ancestry Groups, Dauphin County (2022 5-Year ACS) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Country of Origin | Number with Ancestry | Number Foreign-Born | Percent Foreign-Born | Ancestry Percent of County Population |
| 1 | Puerto Rico | 16,168 | N/A | N/A | 5.7% |
| 2 | Mexico | 4,868 | 1,916 | 39% | 1.7% |
| 3 | Nepal | 4,015 | 1,822 | 45% | 1.4% |
| 4 | India | 3,177 | 2,198 | 69% | 1.1% |
| 5 | Dominican Republic | 3,156 | 2,020 | 64% | 1.1% |
| 6 | Vietnam | 2,131 | 1,601 | 75% | 0.7% |
| 7 | China, Except Taiwan | 2,105 | 942 | 45% | 0.7% |
| 8 | Bhutan | 1,530 | 2,372 | 155% | 0.5% |

The table above shows the largest non-Western European nationality groups for which data is available in Dauphin County that make up at least one half of one percent of the county's population by ancestry and have foreign-born rates of more than 10%, plus Puerto Rico. Foreign-born data is not available for Puerto Rico because the island is a United States Territory and individuals born there are US Citizens.

The Puerto Rican community is by far the largest non-Western European ancestry group in Dauphin County at more than 16,000 individuals and 5.7% of the county's overall population. In a distant second place is the Mexican community at just under 5,000 individuals, or 1.7% of the county's population, followed closely by persons with Nepali ancestry at just over 4,000 individuals or 1.4% of total population. Like other counties in the region, including Lancaster and Lebanon, three of the top five non-Western European ancestry groups and a majority of individuals of non-Western European ancestry are Hispanic.[22,23] However, Dauphin differs from many of its neighbors in also having substantial South and East Asian communities.

### Geographic Dispersion of Selected Non-Western European Ancestry Groups in Dauphin County

Members of the different national ancestry groups discussed in the table above are not evenly distributed evenly across Dauphin County. This section describes the geographic dispersion of the eight most common non-Western European ancestry groups by census tract within Dauphin County, according to the 2022 5-Year ACS estimates.

The maps on the following page of Dauphin County at large and of Harrisburg and its immediate suburbs use a plotting method in which one dot represents one individual living in a census tract and each color represents a different ancestry group. This method allows the map to show both the relative size and density of the various non-Western European ancestry groups in any given area and across the county.

At a countywide level, it is clear that, as with the overall population, most of the non-Western European individuals in Dauphin County live in and around Harrisburg and its suburbs, though there are still noticeable Puerto Rican communities in the Williamstown and Millersburg areas, Mexican communities around Berrysburg and Gratz, and a small Chinese community in the Halifax area. It is also visually evident that the Puerto Rican community is more than three times the size of the next largest non-Western European ancestry group.
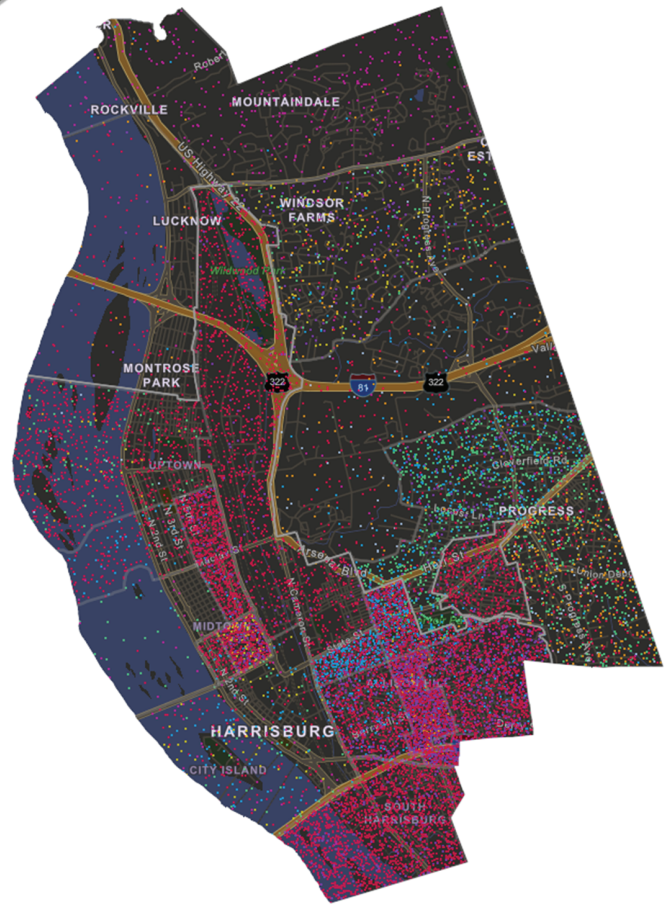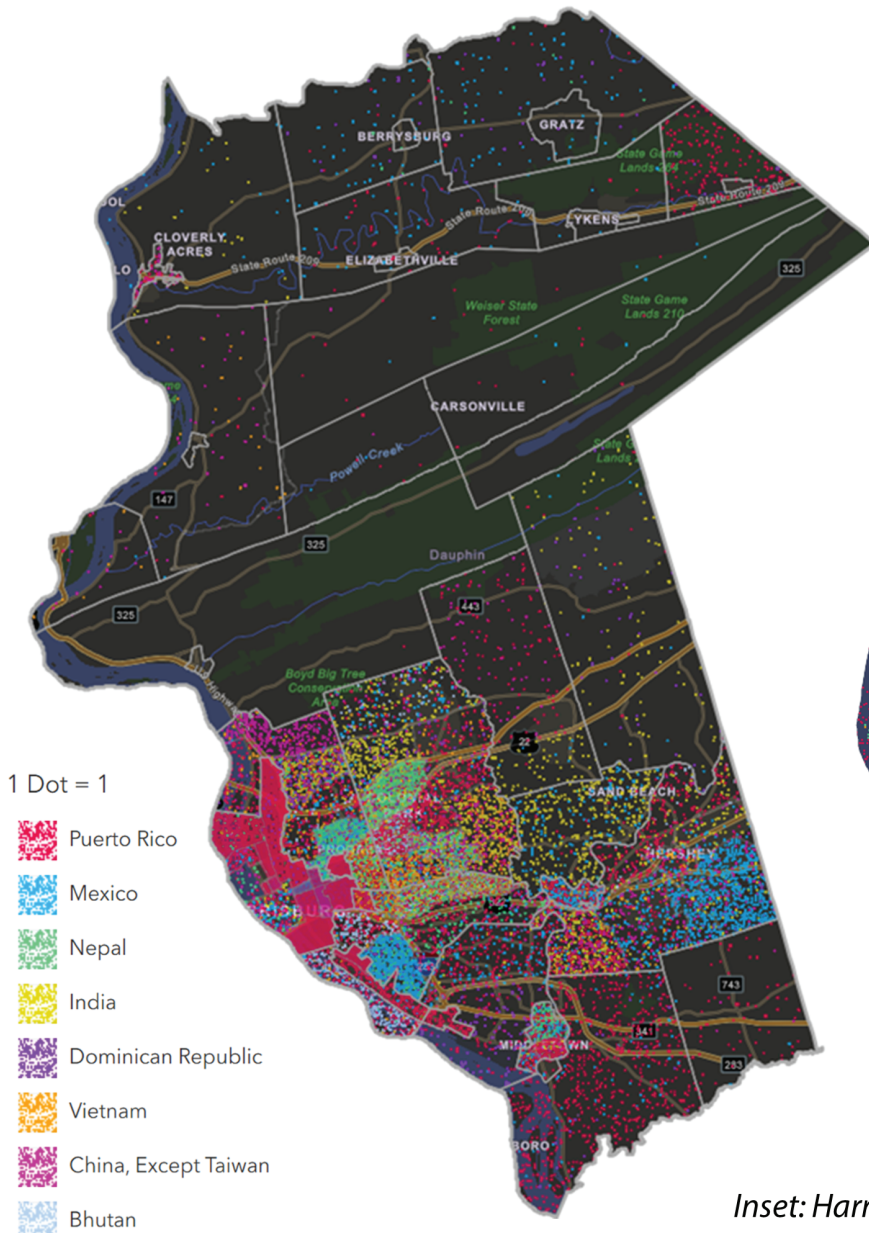
A closer look at Harrisburg reveals that, like the county at large, the Puerto Rican community is the largest non-Western European ancestry group. In total, nearly half of the Puerto Rican population of Dauphin County resides within the City of Harrisburg. Harrisburg has a notable Mexican community in Allison Hill, especially north of Market Street, while Dominican individuals primarily reside south of Market Street and in South Harrisburg.

Elsewhere in the county, other patterns emerge, with different ancestry groups residing in different areas. Hispanic groups are widely dispersed across the county, with a substantial Puerto Rican presence in many suburban areas as well as in Steelton, Highspire, and the greater Middletown area in addition to in Harrisburg. Mexican communities are primarily concentrated in the Hershey area, with a secondary concentration in Oberlin.

South Asian groups, including individuals of Nepali, Indian, and Bhutanese descent, generally live in suburban areas surrounding Harrisburg, but the specific locations differ for each ancestry group – Nepali populations are densest in the Progress and Colonial Park areas near the intersection of Interstates 81 and 83, though there is also a Nepali community in Middletown. Meanwhile, Bhutanese populations lie more in the US 322 corridor in Oakleigh, Rutherford, and Lawnton. Indian populations are more dispersed, with communities around Colonial Park, Lawnton and Rutherford, and east of Hershey in the Hummelstown area.

1 Dot = 1

- Puerto Rico
- Mexico
- Nepal
- India
- Dominican Republic
- Vietnam
- China, Except Taiwan
- Bhutan

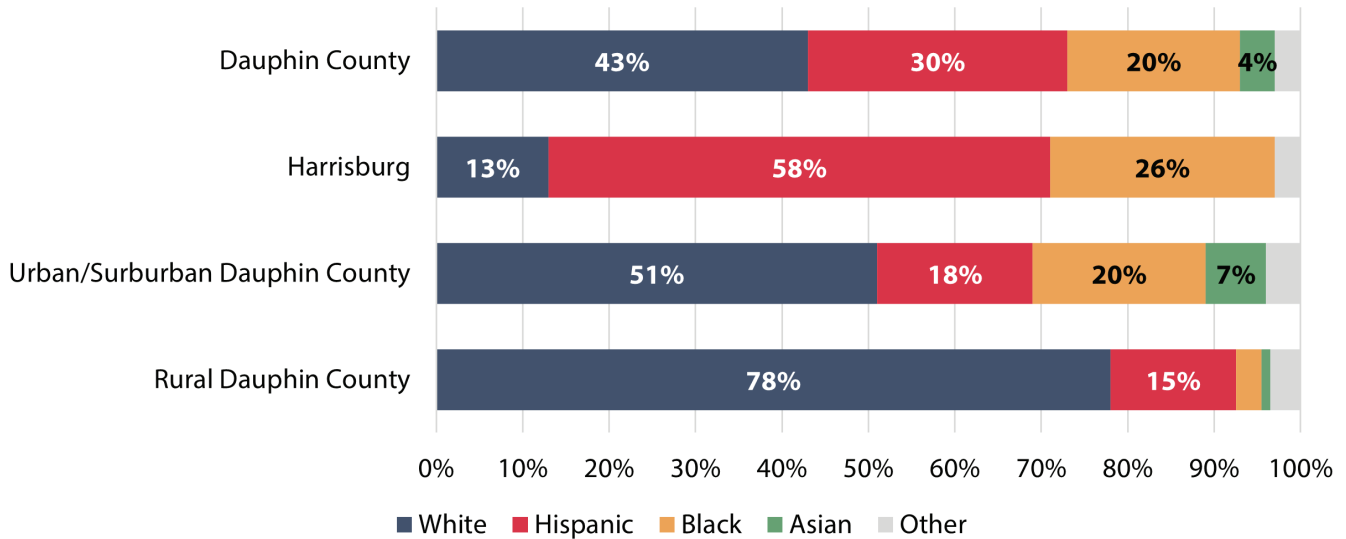*Inset: Harrisburg, Penbrook, and Susquehanna Township*

East Asian communities primarily live in suburban Harrisburg; the Chinese community is fairly widely dispersed but is most prominent in northern Susquehanna Township. The Vietnamese community mainly resides in the Paxtang, Lakeview Heights, and Progress areas, near where Interstate 83 runs between US 322 and Interstate 81.

## Culturally Familiar Foods

Neighbor surveys asked respondents to identify their race and ethnicity, as well as if they identified with any countries or cultures outside the mainland United States, and if so, which one. The figure on the following page shows the race/ethnicity breakdown among pantry survey respondents by region within Dauphin County. Countywide, a plurality (43%) of pantry visitors were non-Hispanic white individuals, with Hispanic individuals making up the next largest group at 30%, Black individuals third at 20%, and Asian individuals fourth at 4%.

As with the ACS data, there were clear regional patterns in demographics among pantry visitors across the county – a sizable majority (58%) of pantry visitors in Harrisburg were Hispanic, followed by Black visitors at 26%. Just 13% of Harrisburg pantry visitors identified as non-Hispanic white. Urban/Suburban Dauphin County pantries saw a slim majority of non-Hispanic white individuals (51%), with Hispanic and Black individuals each making up about a fifth of visitors (18% and 20% respectively). Asian visitors made up about 7% of Urban/Suburban pantry visitors, the largest proportion of any region. Rural Dauphin County pantry visitors were overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white (78%), but there was also a significant proportion of Hispanic pantry visitors in this region (15%).

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## Race/Ethnicity among Pantry Survey Participants by Dauphin County Region

**Dauphin County:** White 43% | Hispanic 30% | Black 20% | Asian 4%

**Harrisburg:** White 13% | Hispanic 58% | Black 26%

**Urban/Surburban Dauphin County:** White 51% | Hispanic 18% | Black 20% | Asian 7%

**Rural Dauphin County:** White 78% | Hispanic 15%

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%
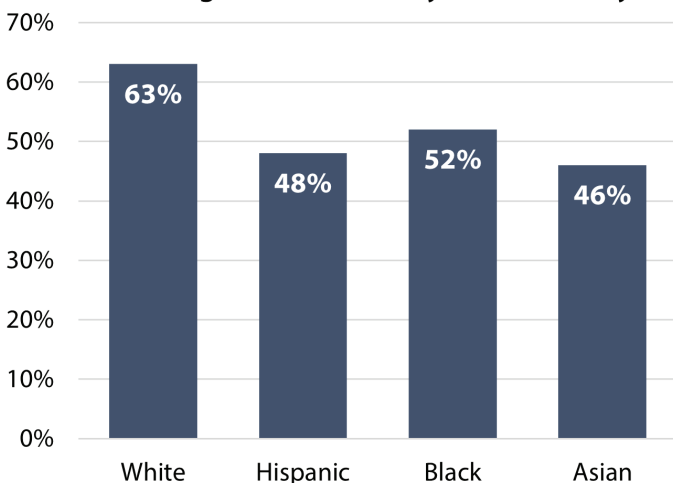
■ White  ■ Hispanic  ■ Black  ■ Asian  ■ Other

Neighbor surveys asked pantry visitors about their satisfaction with the foods they receive at the pantry, with potential responses ranging from "never" receiving the foods they need and want to "always" receiving those foods. Reported frequency of receiving desired food varied significantly by race and ethnicity across Dauphin County. White individuals were most likely to indicate that they frequently received foods they wanted and needed, while Hispanic, Black, and Asian individuals were between 21% and 36% less likely to often or always receive desired foods. The disparity in these responses indicates that the charitable food network has room to improve around providing culturally familiar and preferable foods to all pantry visitors.

### Percent of Pantry Visitors Reporting "Often or Always" Receiving Desired Foods by Hispanic or Latino Origin

Overall 59% | Dominican 43% | Puerto Rican 47% | Other Hispanic 53% | Hispanic 48%
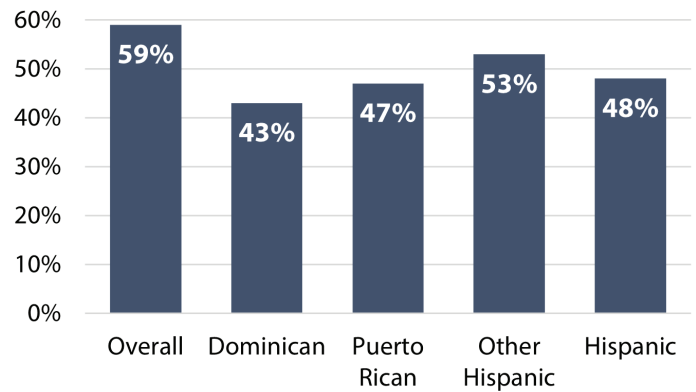
### Percent Reporting "Often or Always" Receiving Desired Foods by Race/Ethnicity

White 63% | Hispanic 48% | Black 52% | Asian 46%

Responses to culture identified with, if any, outside the mainland United States provide insight into culturally preferred foods in some communities. Though there was not enough data to break out specific nationalities within the Asian and Black communities, the data shows differences in satisfaction with pantry offerings by nationality within the Hispanic and Latino community. Dominican individuals were least likely to have reported often or always receiving foods they wanted or needed at 43%, while Puerto Rican individuals were slightly more likely at 47%, as were a slim majority (53%) of individuals identifying with other Hispanic nationalities.

The survey asked neighbors to list up to three food items that they need or want but are not able to get from the pantry. Just under two thirds of overall survey respondents (62%) mentioned at least one item they wanted but could not always get. Slicing this data by race and ethnicity as well as by ancestry allows for an assessment of the types of foods and specific products the charitable food system should source to provide an equitable, culturally relevant service to all neighbors.

| Specific Food Preferences by Selected Race/Ethnicity and Reported Ancestry | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Overall | Hispanic | Puerto Rico | Dominican Republic |
| 1 | Meat | Meat | Meat | Meat |
| 2 | Produce | Produce | Eggs | Produce |
| 3 | Eggs | Rice | Produce | Rice |
| 4 | Milk | Eggs | Cheese | Oil |
| 5 | Rice | Oil | Rice/Bread | Eggs/Milk/Juice |

*"The only thing is you have to wake up so early to get the tickets. At least it helps us with many things — meat, for the milk, for the kids."*

*– Pantry Visitor*

The table above shows the most requested items among all survey respondents and Hispanic respondents, with a further breakdown within the Hispanic community to show the items requested by Puerto Rican and Dominican individuals.

Overall, four of the five most frequently requested items – meat, produce, eggs, and rice – are the same between all respondents and Hispanic respondents, and the top two, meat and produce, are the same for both groups. The items that differ are milk and oil, and both come in lower on the list. Within the Hispanic community, meat again tops the list for both Puerto Rican and Dominican respondents, while the order of the rest of the list differs; Puerto Rican individuals were more likely to have requested eggs, cheese, and bread than were Dominican individuals, who indicated stronger preferences for rice and oil. However, the overall product categories still generally align, giving clear direction around what items and product categories the charitable food system should seek out and prioritize.

Additionally, it is important to highlight rice within the list of requested items – though it ranks no higher than third in the above table, rice is a global staple that was commonly requested by individuals identifying with Asian and African cultures as well as Hispanic individuals from countries across the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. In this context, rice variety matters – some survey responses from South Asian households specified basmati rice, for example.
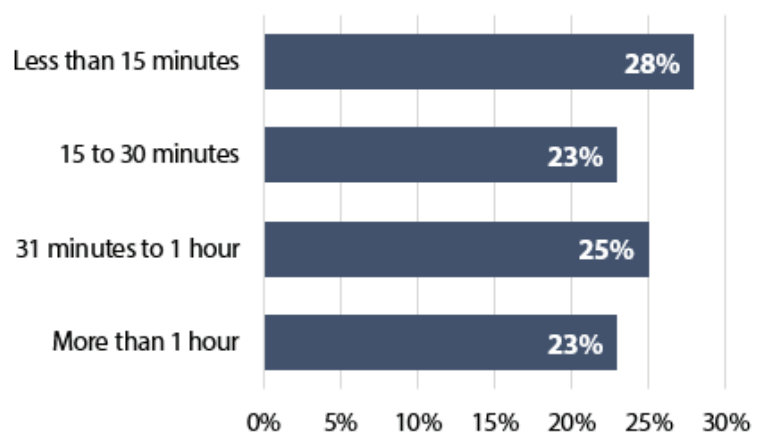
### WAIT TIMES AT PANTRIES IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

Almost a quarter (23%) of surveyed households indicated waiting longer than an hour to receive groceries at their pantry. In many cases, CPFB researchers could locate a pantry by the line of people waiting outside. Although the longest lines were usually observed prior to the official start of a pantry distribution, some locations have a continuous line of people waiting. This can be the result of several different factors; it is usually caused by a combination of the limitations of the physical pantry space, pantry policies, the severity of food insecurity in the community, and past experiences of neighbors who may be worried that a late arrival to the pantry means receiving less or no food for their household.

One pantry visitor said, "For us, to be the first to get things, we have to be up to five hours before the time that they start. To arrive and get there with the number one ticket or two. That tells me there are plenty of people who go to the pantry. Up to number ten you can have access to various things like meat, vegetables, fruit. After number ten, when people are coming in to get their ticket, there's already fewer things and some things aren't there."

Many food pantries in Dauphin County and elsewhere are based in repurposed spaces borrowed from friendly churches or other community organizations. Constraints of volunteer availability and the physical space itself contribute to long and unpleasant wait times, especially when there is simply no place for a visitor to wait other than outside or in a parking lot. However, pantries should ensure that neighbors are shielded from the elements to the largest extent possible and prioritize making indoor waiting space available in the case of inclement weather.

In Dauphin County, the pantry with the highest wait times saw neighbors arriving well before dawn to get in line outside. These neighbors noted that waiting consumes a significant portion of their morning; this pantry has experimented with a number system to allow people to check in and return later to minimize time spent outside. At other pantries, neighbors expressed worry about dangerous conditions. One neighbor said of her pantry, "Let us wait inside as before. It's too hot as a mom with kids."

**Wait Times at Dauphin County Food Pantries**

| | |
|---|---|
| Less than 15 minutes | 28% |
| 15 to 30 minutes | 23% |
| 31 minutes to 1 hour | 25% |
| More than 1 hour | 23% |

Many pantry visitors mentioned that they aim to be first in line because they expect that the food available will be substantially different between the beginning and end of a distribution. Highly desired items such as milk, eggs, or meat often are available in limited quantities and may run out well before the pantry closes, and the overall amount of food a visitor receives may vary quite a bit depending on their place in line.

One neighbor told a CPFB researcher that "the quantity of people who go there to pick up foods, there is a lot of us, so the shortage is prevalent. Of course, the interest of every person is in getting there early to be one of the first people to be able to pick up an acceptable amount, but it's too early that people are needing to come to pick up."

Pantries should consider and experiment with ways to shorten lines and wait times for pantry visitors. Thinking through actionable steps that could help reduce wait times is especially important for pantries whose neighbors are in line hours in advance and may be exposed to the elements and inclement weather by waiting outdoors.

Increasing the number of times a pantry is open during a week or a month, if possible, could help to minimize wait times by spreading the demand for services over a greater period of time. Adding more service days and times could both improve the neighbor experience for current pantry visitors substantially and make services more accessible to neighbors who may not be visitors at present because they do not have the ability to wait in lengthy queues for service.

Appointment-based pantry services are another potential method that could help to control the volume of people during food distribution and shorten time spent in line. However, pantries must ensure that creating an appointment-based system does not shift the wait time from waiting for food to waiting to schedule an appointment. Implementing a process like appointments should be done with care to minimize complications. Accessibility for individuals whose primary language is not English, flexibility for emergency services and walk-ins, access for new visitors unfamiliar with the process, and agency support for volunteers and staff as they help neighbors navigate the system must all be considered. If pantries choose to utilize appointments, methods to serve people unable to schedule appointments should be in place, such as a system that mixes appointment and walk-up services to ensure that appointments do not restrict access.

## TRANSPORTATION

Overall, one in five food pantry visitors in Dauphin County reported having trouble reaching their food pantry because they lacked easy access to a car or public transportation. In addition, 38% of non-food pantry survey respondents who mentioned having visited food pantries in the past but not being a current pantry user cited transportation access as the main reason they stopped going. This is significantly higher than in other counties.[24]
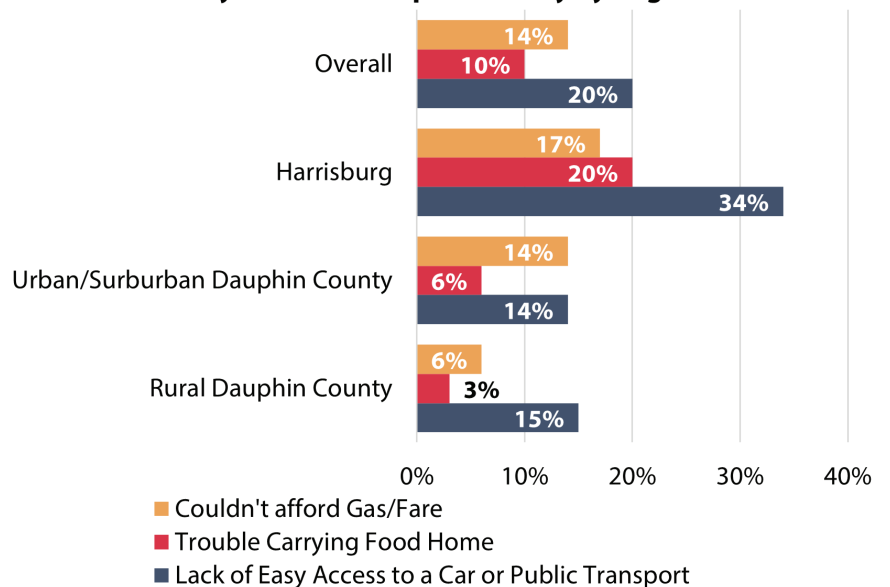
Transportation barriers are particularly acute in Harrisburg. More than one third (34%) of individuals said they lack easy access to a car or public transportation, and many walk long distances to reach their pantries.

For people with limited or inconsistent transportation access, returning home with groceries following a pantry distribution is a challenge. Overall, 10% of survey respondents said they have trouble carrying food home; in Harrisburg, the rate is double.

Some neighbors in Urban/Suburban and Rural Dauphin County also cited lack of easy access to a car or public transportation as barriers to access, but the proportions are less than half those seen in Harrisburg. However, in Urban/Suburban Dauphin, where neighbors generally must drive to pantries, 14% of neighbors reported having trouble affording gas to reach their food pantry.

Households with children and working-age households without children face the most transportation challenges, especially in Harrisburg, where 38% of these respondents said that they lack easy access to a car, compared to 7% among senior households in the city. Working-age households without children were the most likely to note they had trouble carrying food home in Harrisburg, likely because working-age households without children who live in the city are disproportionately more likely to have a disabled member than are other household types.

### Reported Transportation-Related Challenges to Food Pantry Access in Dauphin County by Region

Overall
- Couldn't afford Gas/Fare: 14%
- Trouble Carrying Food Home: 10%
- Lack of Easy Access to a Car or Public Transport: 20%

Harrisburg
- Couldn't afford Gas/Fare: 17%
- Trouble Carrying Food Home: 20%
- Lack of Easy Access to a Car or Public Transport: 34%

Urban/Surburban Dauphin County
- Couldn't afford Gas/Fare: 14%
- Trouble Carrying Food Home: 6%
- Lack of Easy Access to a Car or Public Transport: 14%

Rural Dauphin County
- Couldn't afford Gas/Fare: 6%
- Trouble Carrying Food Home: 3%
- Lack of Easy Access to a Car or Public Transport: 15%

■ Couldn't afford Gas/Fare
■ Trouble Carrying Food Home
■ Lack of Easy Access to a Car or Public Transport

Several pantries CPFB researchers visited shared that volunteers or staff assist neighbors with transportation or grocery delivery when possible. No pantry is able to offer this service for every single neighbor at present; most prioritized the elderly, infirm, or households in crisis. This is another example of the compassionate responsiveness of charitable food providers who are filling in gaps to meet the needs of their communities. Neighbors are also resourceful and plan carpools or offer rides to other pantry visitors. In Harrisburg, 17% of pantry visitors stated that they use public transportation to get to a pantry, so one potential future opportunity may be to coordinate pantry opening times with bus schedules to increase access. Organizations with more capacity could explore providing transportation as part of their program, similar to models used in other counties.

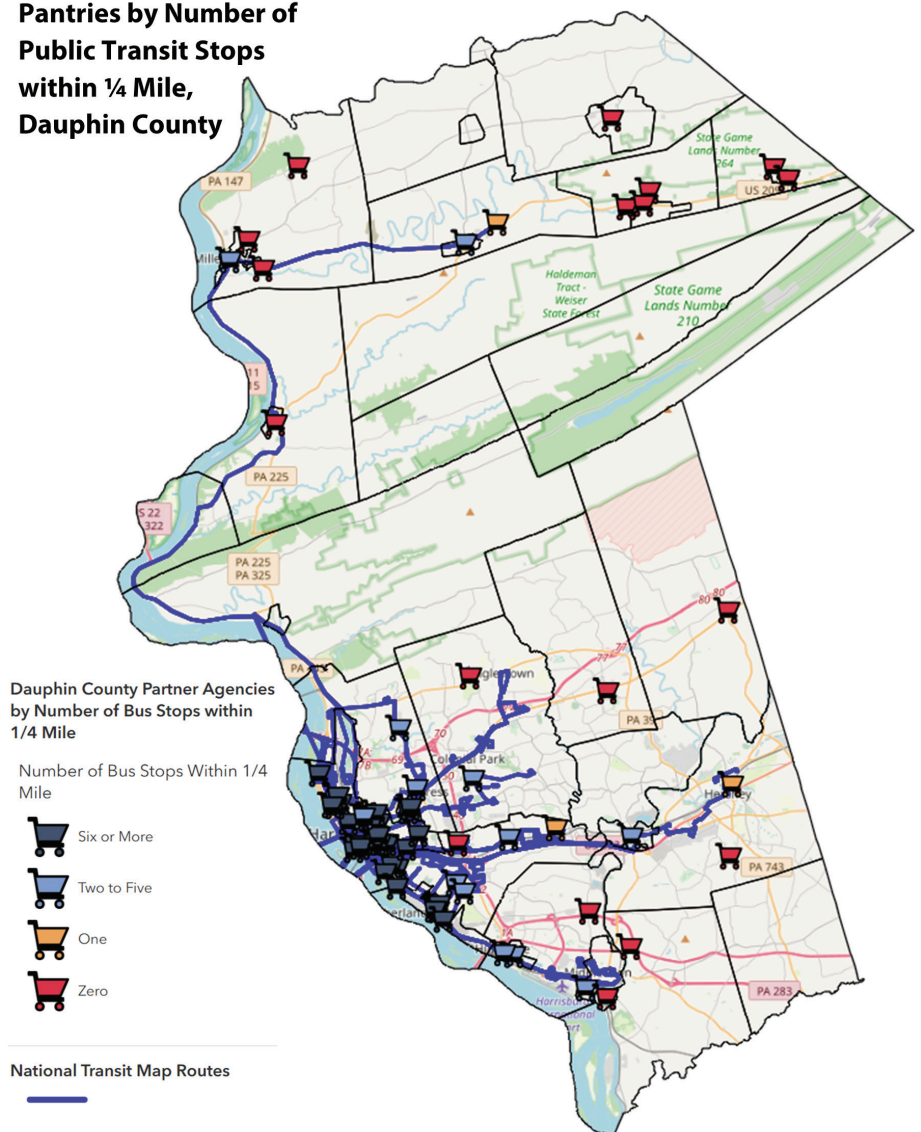## Pantry Access Via Public Transit

To better understand potential barriers to pantry access, the following analysis examines the number of bus stops within a ¼ mile walking distance of food pantries within Dauphin County using federally available public transportation route and stop data from the United States Department of Transportation in combination with CPFB's agency location data. This analysis was conducted using ArcGIS and considers only truly walkable distance via accessible streets, rather than a simple circular radius; this method is more reflective of the real-life experience of using transit to get to or from a pantry than other models would be. Please note that this analysis is inclusive of traditional food pantry sites, including satellite distributions operated by a larger partner agency, and of CPFB-operated Fresh Express mobile distributions, but not of other programs that have age- or demographic-based restrictions such as youth programs, senior programs, and MilitaryShare.

The map at right shows all partner locations meeting the above criteria by number of accessible bus stops; pantries with no bus stops within ¼ mile are shown in bright red, those with one are shown in yellow, those with two to five are in light blue, and those with six or more are in dark gray. The map also shows Dauphin County's bus routes in blue.

Of the 68 traditional pantry or Fresh Express locations in Dauphin County, 50, or 73%, are within a ¼ mile walking distance of at least one transit stop. Just three agencies with transit access are within walking distance of only one stop, and a sizable majority (35, or 70%) of transit-accessible pantries are within a quarter mile of five or more stops. Agencies in or near the Harrisburg city limits and in Steelton borough have especially good access to transit; some agencies located in dense, walkable areas like Uptown, Midtown, or Downtown Harrisburg, as well as in Allison Hill, may have as many as 23 bus stops within a quarter mile walk.

Half of the eighteen agency locations that are more than a quarter mile away from a bus stop lie in northern Dauphin County. Specifically, they sit in areas like Halifax, Gratz, Millersburg, Williamstown, and Lykens; several of them are satellite distributions of a larger pantry that are specifically designed to extend access to neighbors who might have difficulty traveling.

**Pantries by Number of Public Transit Stops within ¼ Mile, Dauphin County**



**Dauphin County Partner Agencies by Number of Bus Stops within 1/4 Mile**

Number of Bus Stops Within 1/4 Mile

🛒 Six or More

🛒 Two to Five

🛒 One

🛒 Zero

**National Transit Map Routes**
───

Eight of the remaining agencies that lack a nearby bus stop are more spread out but share the commonality of serving car-dependent suburban or exurban areas like greater Middletown, greater Hershey, Linglestown, Skyline View, and Grantville. The last agency lacking a bus stop within ¼ mile is in Oakleigh near the Interstate 83/US 322 split; this area is more urban and walkable, and there are several bus stops along Derry Street near this pantry, but all are just outside the quarter-mile walkshed.

When combined with the results of neighbor surveys, these findings indicate that the trouble neighbors may have regarding utilizing public transportation to visit pantries is not primarily related to pantry proximity to transit stops, especially in Harrisburg and its immediate surroundings. As stated earlier, incongruence of the transit schedule and pantry hours are very likely to be a major barrier for neighbors who wish to visit by bus, along with other difficulties like bag limits and restrictions around collapsible grocery cart use on transit.

**Reasons for Not Utilizing a Food Pantry among Food Insecure Non-Participants in Dauphin County**

| Reason | Percentage |
|---|---|
| No car or transportation | 38% |
| Not knowing how or where to find a pantry | 25% |
| Hours of operation | 25% |
| Doesn't think they have the foods they like or need | 13% |

## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING FOOD PANTRY SERVICES FOR CURRENT NON-PARTICIPANTS

Non-food pantry surveys provide insight into the perspectives of individuals who may need food pantry services but are not currently accessing them. Many respondents who said they did not use food pantry services reported that they did not know how or where to find a food pantry (25%) or that they do not think a food pantry would have foods they like (13%), which could reflect stigmas about foods offered at food pantries or an assumption that a food pantry may not have the foods that neighbors might desire.

Pantries must increase awareness of their services to ensure that households who need food assistance can use them. Promotion of services can clarify critical details such as hours of operation, a notable reason (25%) why neighbors indicated they do not visit food pantries.

Public libraries and clinics are key sites for promoting services, as well as school newsletters and local newspapers. Local non-profits, social services, and health organizations have a responsibility to promote their local food pantry's services by identifying the sites in their surrounding area and promoting them through flyers and program materials wherever possible.

Promoting services helps encourage word of mouth as a powerful way for people to learn about services. Through interviews, many pantry visitors said they learned about their pantry from a friend or neighbor. Others said they noticed people walking in and out of the pantry building and eventually checked for themselves.
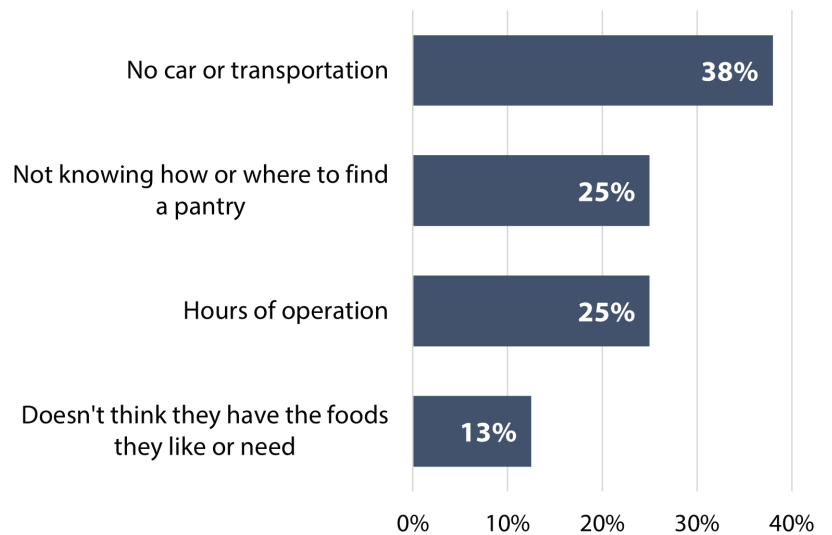
## PARTNER EXPERIENCE AND FOOD SOURCING

Two thirds of pantries (more than 65%) reported that funding is the most pressing challenge they face in carrying out their services. This sentiment was echoed at both partner listening sessions. "We do not receive enough grant money to help us through the fiscal year," a partner shared.

Partners expressed particular concern about their ability to maintain the quantity and diversity of foods they can provide to their communities as the cost of sourcing has rapidly increased, while key sources of funding such as the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) have stagnated. Under such constraints, partners have been forced to make difficult decisions about the volume and types of foods they can provide, which often means ordering smaller quantities of items that are most desired by neighbors such as meat, milk, eggs, bread, and produce.

The above items are often in short supply from CPFB due to high demand and may be expensive for partners to order when they are available. Though food sourcing challenges and inconsistency in the products available for food banks to purchase or rescue is an industry-wide issue, it is also a downstream issue for partners who face an unpredictable inventory list from which to order on a week-to-week basis. "Produce is not always available," a partner shared. "I usually can only get milk or eggs, seldom both."

Partners occasionally shared disappointment in receiving spoiled foods in their orders, and a reluctance to order specific foods again to avoid having to sift through items before a distribution. "It would be better to not receive any produce at all," one partner shared. Part of this concern was raised in relation to the long window of time between the deadline to order items, including produce, and the timing of their actual delivery. The logistics behind food orders and deliveries are complicated and in need of ongoing revision to ensure that foods are delivered in a timely and consumable fashion. In addition, every order should be checked for quality control before leaving CPFB or any other donating facility so partners and neighbors can receive usable foods.

The next most prominent challenge raised by partners, after funding and sourcing, was volunteer availability and retention. Nearly 27% of partners mentioned the need for more volunteers, especially those who speak Spanish or other languages in addition to English. This is a critical need in a county that is ethnically diverse. In addition, overextended pantry workers are prone to burnout, which has negative implications for both service providers and neighbors who may receive incomplete service and be treated poorly.

Pantries interested in finding more volunteers should reach out to local churches, businesses, schools, and civic organizations. Pantry visitors can make great volunteers but should only do so if they offer to help without prompting and do not receive preferential treatment. Many people in the community are interested in volunteering but just do not know where to look. A countywide volunteer portal would be an excellent initiative for the food policy council to establish for greater outreach.

Pantry staff and volunteers expressed a great deal of interest in continued opportunities to meet and converse with neighboring food pantries, like the listening sessions that were held as part of the primary data collection phase of this report. Formation of a Dauphin County Food Policy Council should center listening and community conversations in their work so food pantries of all types and sizes can continue to voice their experiences and exchange resources with each other.

### PANTRY CAPACITY

The maps on the following page show the results of an analysis of CPFB partner agencies and mobile distributions in Dauphin County by pounds distributed and agency type. Agencies and programs with age- or demographic-based restrictions, such as youth programs, senior programs, and MilitaryShare are again excluded. Due to data limitations, offsite satellite distributions operated by larger agencies are included as points on the map, but pounds are assigned only to the pantry's main location.

Most of Dauphin County's food pantries, including the single largest agency in the county, are located in and around Harrisburg. Since Harrisburg and its suburbs contain most of the population of the county and account for half of all food insecure individuals in Dauphin County, this is an expected finding.
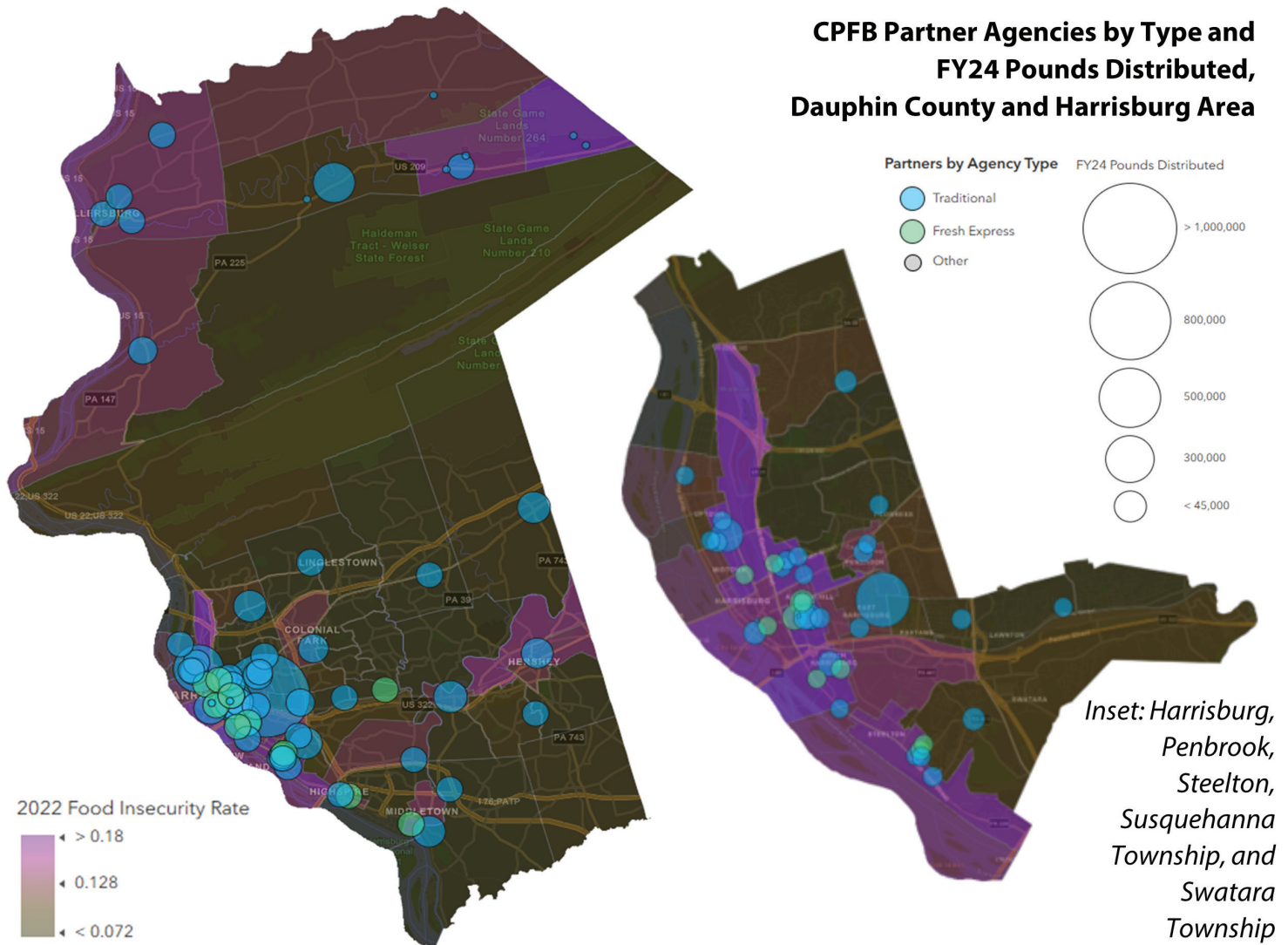
There is an especially large number of food pantries in Harrisburg, which follows the distribution of the food insecure population of Dauphin County. Despite their density, pantries in Harrisburg are not disproportionately smaller in terms of total pounds distributed or pounds distributed per household than pantries in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County or Rural Dauphin County.

Taken in combination with other findings in this report around topics like Very Low Food Security rates among pantry visitors, these results indicate that Harrisburg's pantries may need additional support to fully meet their mission of combating food insecurity due to the extreme depth and breadth of need in the city.

Indeed, many pantries identified a need for additional resources in listening sessions and via partner surveys, and visitors also indicated that they thought pantries could use an extra hand. One interview participant said, "The only thing I ask is that, in general, if they can receive more help to help us. If they can receive more things to be able to help us with, then they would have more to give us," underscoring the critical role that pantries play in providing for basic needs in Harrisburg and across the county.

Harrisburg's pantries show distinct clustering within the city; they can be divided into groups based on their concentrations in at least six different neighborhoods, including South Allison Hill, northern Allison Hill, East Harrisburg, South Harrisburg, Downtown, and Midtown/ Uptown. Pantries in each of these neighborhoods works hard to serve their neighbors; in light of the disparities in transportation access, food insecurity, and other related issues across the city, it is critically important that each neighborhood's pantries have the equitable, sufficient support and investment they need to provide robust food services.

Because local communities are the most knowledgeable about their own needs, the agencies in each neighborhood should consider meeting regularly and working collaboratively, potentially as subgroups of a Dauphin County Food Policy Council. By working together, pantries may be able to support each other by sharing ideas, volunteers, and any surplus product. Neighborhood-level pantry collaboration could help pantries identify opportunities to help the entire network improve services for neighbors without putting too much burden on any single pantry, such as identifying locations that are good candidates to pursue hours and days of operation adjustments or advocacy around issues that affect the community at large, such as transportation access barriers. Neighborhood pantry alliances could seek investments as a group and otherwise take collective action that could have more impact than if one pantry acted alone.

**CPFB Partner Agencies by Type and FY24 Pounds Distributed, Dauphin County and Harrisburg Area**



*Inset: Harrisburg, Penbrook, Steelton, Susquehanna Township, and Swatara Township*

# Charitable Food Access Main Findings and Recommendations

**Section 2 Finding 1: The charitable food system in Dauphin County meaningfully reduces very low food security.** For the charitable food system to have the biggest impact on very low food security, pantry visitors need to be able to receive services at least one to two times per month.

**Recommendation:** Pantries should work together to ensure that people can receive at least two services and/or visit at least two pantries if they need to do so over the course of a month. Visiting the same or different charitable food providers more than once per month does not constitute a duplication of services.

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**Section 2 Finding 2: As found countywide, food pantries in Harrisburg reduce very low food security among its visitors, but the effect is smaller than in other areas of Dauphin County.** The difference in food security status among food pantry visitors by county region reflects the sheer scale of food insecurity in Harrisburg and the immense scope of the challenge city pantries face when rising to respond.

Very low food security directly corresponds with incomes below the poverty level; 75% of pantry visitors in Harrisburg have incomes below the federal poverty level, compared to 31% of pantry visitors in Rural Dauphin County and 39% of those in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County outside of Harrisburg.

**Recommendation:** The disproportionate challenge that pantries in Harrisburg must meet when working to alleviate food insecurity within the city requires a strong collective response from the entire community. To resolve these inequities, substantial investments from the public and stakeholders across the county and state should be targeted toward reducing poverty and food insecurity in Harrisburg and supporting the agencies who serve Harrisburg's neighbors in need.

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**Section 2 Finding 3: There are many strengths of the charitable food system in Dauphin County in addition to the fact that it demonstrably reduces hunger.** These strengths include strong geographic access to pantries and widespread access to choice and "off-hours" distributions during evenings and weekends.

**Recommendation:** Pantries should continue to employ best practices, including implementing choice models as much as possible and providing off-hours distributions. Some gap areas remain; for choice access, a gap lies in northern Dauphin County, while evening and weekend gaps are found both north of Peters Mountain and in parts of Midtown Harrisburg. Pantries in these areas should strongly consider their capacity to increase choice and expand services into "off-hours" distributions.

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**Section 2 Finding 4: Pantry visit analysis at a census tract level shows that the number of unique pantry visitors are at least equal to the number of food insecure individuals in nearly all census tracts in the Harrisburg area and many other areas of the county.** The primary exceptions are two adjoining census tracts in Lower Paxton Township near the intersection of Interstate 83 and Jonestown Road and the Millersburg area.

**Recommendation:** There could be opportunities to increase access and awareness to pantries in Lower Paxton Township and in northern Dauphin County, although this should be verified with additional onboarding of agencies onto the Service Insights on MealConnect electronic neighbor intake tool. There are utilization gaps in other areas as well, but these may be a result of the pantries in these surrounding areas of Dauphin County not utilizing Service Insights on MealConnect.

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**Section 2 Finding 5: Reported feelings of judgment at pantries across Dauphin County averaged 7%, which is higher than in other counties where CPFB has completed Community Hunger Mapping projects.** Although pantries across Dauphin County are generally friendly and welcoming, judgment directed towards, and poor treatment of pantry visitors were severe issues at times. Conflict arose mostly due to stigma and judgment, compliance practices and pantry rules, and language barriers.

**Recommendation:** The overall generous spirit of food pantries can be spoiled by negative interactions, which can be avoided by eliminating unnecessary documentation requirements, simplifying pantry processes, and utilizing community and Food Bank resources for help with language barriers. Prioritizing these tasks can reduce conflict and stress between neighbors and pantry volunteers almost immediately and may help shift the dynamic of "giver" vs "receiver" to one based in mutual, community care.

The charitable food system should work to eliminate documentation requirements and simplify pantry processes as a primary means to improve neighbor treatment. It is crucial that volunteers treat everyone with dignity and respect; methods to ensure high-quality neighbor services could include trauma-informed care training and placing suitable volunteers in neighbor-facing roles.

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**Section 2 Finding 6: Many food pantries have a wide variety of restrictive documentation requirements for neighbors, including those that go beyond allowable practices from the USDA and Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.** More than half of pantries require neighbors to present ID at the point of service, and 44% require additional proof of residence such as utility bills.

**Recommendation:** Completion of a Self-Declaration of Need form is the only allowable prerequisite to pantry service. Pantries may ask for ID to assist in the spelling of names and addresses but cannot use a lack of ID to refuse services to a household. Inconsistent adherence to basic guidelines at pantries across the county creates confusion for neighbors and unnecessarily and arbitrarily establishes barriers in what is meant to be a low barrier system.

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**Section 2 Finding 7: Households with children in Dauphin County are often subjected to differing rules around the presence of children at food pantry distributions.** These rules can exacerbate feelings of judgment or create conflict that can have a disproportionate impact on children. Households with children make up just over half of Dauphin County's food pantry visitors as measured by surveys and data from 24 agencies on Service Insights on MealConnect and are disproportionately represented among pantry visitor households who face very low food security.

**Recommendation:** Pantries should allow children and all household members to accompany their caregivers in food pantries. Households with children, especially single households with children, may be put under undue stress by not allowing families to shop together. While children can exhibit unexpected behaviors, these behaviors exist in regular stores as well, and people adjust. Pantries should be no different.

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**Section 2 Finding 8: Pantry visitors in Dauphin County speak more than ten languages, with Spanish being the most widely spoken language other than English.** Other languages commonly heard at food pantries include Arabic, Nepali, Haitian Creole, and Urdu. Pantry workers and neighbors alike expressed frustration around the difficulty of communicating through a language barrier, and pantries indicated a need for more multilingual volunteers, with particular priority placed on those that speak Spanish.

**Recommendation:** Pantries should work to ensure that all neighbors have an equitable opportunity to have a successful, pleasant pantry visit regardless of the language(s) they speak. Translated intake forms can make a major difference, as can clear, direct signage that uses broadly recognizable symbology to indicate walking directions, item quantities, and other important information. Pantries seeking bilingual volunteers can use a variety of methods that have been successful for agencies in other counties, including reaching out to civic organizations, churches, schools, and to the community at large on social media.

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**Section 2 Finding 9: Wait times to receive pantry services are elevated for much of the county, especially for pantries open once a week or less.** More than 23% of pantry visitors reported waiting longer than an hour to access services. Pantry visitors often aim to be first in line when they know that the food is substantially different at the beginning and end of a distribution and/or that highly desired items such as milk, eggs, or meat are not available towards the end of a distribution.

**Recommendation:** Pantries can experiment with several ways to shorten lines and wait times for pantry visitors, especially to protect pantry visitors from the elements and inclement weather. Increasing the number of times pantries are open during a week or a month, when possible, can help significantly to reduce long lines wait times at any given distribution. Pantries should make efforts to ensure that the food on offer is as consistent as possible throughout the length of a distribution and to build trust with the neighbors they serve.

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**Section 2 Finding 10: The most requested foods that pantry visitors want but cannot always find include meat, produce, eggs, milk, and rice.** In addition to being more likely to request rice than the overall pantry visitor population, Hispanic households identified oil, bread, cheese, and juice as items they want but cannot always get from the pantries they visit.

Hispanic, Black, and Asian households are around 20% less likely than white, non-Hispanic households in Dauphin County to have reported receiving foods they like "often or always" from their food pantries.

**Recommendation:** The charitable food system should work hard to source products that pantry visitors like, want, and will use, as this can simultaneously improve neighbor experience and make more effective use of capacity by reducing waste. Pantries who want or need to provide more culturally familiar foods should begin by sourcing some of the items listed in this report but should engage with the neighbors they serve directly to learn more, including detailed preferences.

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**Section 2 Finding 11: Transportation access is a major barrier for pantry visitors across Dauphin County but is most prominent in Harrisburg. One in five pantry visitors report finding it difficult to access a pantry due to a lack of transportation.** Though most Dauphin County's food pantries are close to at least one transit stop, many neighbors still report issues with pantry access via bus; likely causes of these problems include a mismatch between bus times and pantry times along with difficulties managing groceries on the bus, including bag quantity or grocery cart restrictions.

**Recommendation:** Transportation is frequently a barrier to access for many types of social services. Pantries should be aware of these challenges and continue to offer assistance when possible. Where public transportation is available, stakeholders should prioritize collaboration to coordinate scheduled bus routes with pantry locations during hours of operation and adjust policies to make it easier to bring groceries home by bus.

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**Section 2 Finding 12: Two thirds of pantry providers reported that funding is their most pressing issue.** Pantries note that food sourcing costs, as well as the number of neighbors they are serving, have dramatically increased, while key government programs like the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funds have stagnated. Partners also mentioned that the inventory on offer at the food bank may be inconsistent or have limited amounts of highly requested items like milk, eggs, and meat. Given these constraints, partners often find themselves forced to offer a smaller quantity and less desirable types of food to their neighbors.

**Recommendation:**  It is imperative that programs such as the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) are sufficiently funded at the state level. SFPP and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS) are major components of many pantries' food budgets; increases to these programs would result in fewer people going hungry across Dauphin County and Pennsylvania. At the federal level, programs such as TEFAP and the Local Food Purchase Agreement are also key to food banks and pantries being able to provide enough high-quality, nutritious food to meet the needs of visitors.

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**Section 2 Finding 13: Pantry providers across Dauphin County reported struggling to recruit enough volunteers to serve neighbors.** Lack of volunteers was the second largest concern among agencies after funding, with 27% of pantries ranking it as their top barrier to service.

**Recommendation:** Significant opportunities for collaboration and support include the creation of a volunteer portal to help connect residents with volunteer opportunities. This could immediately and meaningfully help pantries in their operations. Other opportunities include sharing learnings and best practices, advocacy, and collaborating to meet the evolving needs of the community over time.

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**Section 2 Finding 14: There are significant opportunities for additional collaboration across the charitable food system in Dauphin County in ways that can add value to each pantry's operations and ensure a better neighbor experience for Dauphin County residents facing food insecurity.** At listening sessions, pantry providers were able to share learnings and practices that were helpful to others and expressed enthusiasm about potential future opportunities to do so.

**Recommendation:** To better support collaborative efforts to reduce food insecurity across Dauphin County and to support pantry providers, stakeholders in Dauphin County should create a Food Policy Council with potential backbone support from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, as exists in most other counties in south central Pennsylvania.

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**Section 2 Finding 15: Harrisburg's pantries face a unique challenge in meeting their mission due to the severity of the food insecurity situation in the city.** Pantries and neighbors both identified a need for more support to allow pantries to offer more robust services. Additionally, pantries in Harrisburg are geographically clustered into at least six distinct neighborhoods, each of which have their own unique communities and needs.

**Recommendation:** Because local communities have the best understanding of their own needs, collaboration among pantry providers at a neighborhood and/or regional level under the umbrella of a broader Dauphin County Food Policy Council could be an effective way for pantries to support each other by sharing volunteers, ideas, and more. Local pantry coalitions could also allow the charitable food network to identify geography-specific opportunities to expand access, such as distribution days and hours adjustments, as well as pursue collective opportunities for localized advocacy and investment that would have more impact than if one pantry acted alone. Other stakeholders should work to ensure that Harrisburg pantries are sufficiently supported for the level of response that is required.

## SECTION 3: UTILIZATION OF KEY GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

The charitable food network is just one piece of a larger system working to reduce food insecurity in Dauphin County. Several government programs, such as 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.[25]
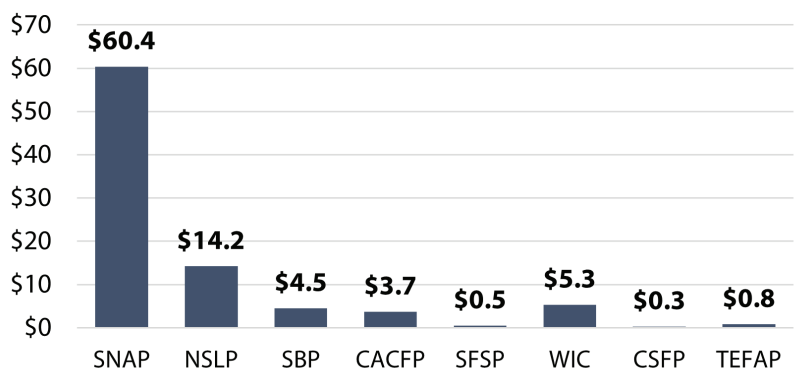
The figure at right shows program expenditures in FY2019, which is the last full year before COVID-19 programmatic changes, and the closest approximation of likely spending proportions going forward. The eight largest programs and their corresponding expenditures are shown. SNAP dwarfs all other programs, making it the most important food security support in the nation.

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.[26] Other smaller, federally funded nutrition programs include the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Government programs are perceived by many pantry visitors and food insecure individuals overall as difficult to navigate.[27] Paperwork is often time-consuming, and necessary documentation may be difficult for neighbors 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.

To achieve the goal of reducing food insecurity, the charitable food system and other stakeholders must actively leverage available federal resources and encourage participation in federal government programs among food insecure individuals. Because Dauphin County has highly disproportionate rates of child food insecurity, the largest opportunity to make a meaningful difference in food insecurity rates via government program outreach and participation lies within the child-focused programs: WIC, NSLP, SBP, and SFSP/SUN Meals.

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

| Program | Expenditure |
|---------|-------------|
| SNAP | $60.4 |
| NSLP | $14.2 |
| SBP | $4.5 |
| CACFP | $3.7 |
| SFSP | $0.5 |
| WIC | $5.3 |
| CSFP | $0.3 |
| TEFAP | $0.8 |

## WIC Participation

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or 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 ($57,720 for a family of four in 2024) 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 six. Applicants already receiving SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are automatically considered income eligible,[28] but the full application for and utilization of WIC benefits is more complex than that of SNAP.

Dauphin County has a relatively high WIC participation rate at 76% and is ranked eleventh in the state in participation by county. However, there are still areas of the county where participation lags; in these places, there are major opportunities to get more resources to households with young children who need them.

### ZIP-CODE LEVEL WIC PARTICIPATION GAPS IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

To estimate WIC participation gaps at a ZIP Code level, the following analysis uses WIC participation data for children provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and American Community Survey 5-Year estimates of the number of children under the age of six in households with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty line by ZIP Code. A simple division of participating children over the number of likely eligible children as determined by age and income provides a WIC participation rate and gap estimate. The age mismatch between ACS data is not a substantial issue due to the value of the comparative outreach prioritization focus of the analysis, with less emphasis on the absolute gap amounts.

The results of this analysis highlight four areas as strong targets for WIC outreach. Most importantly, ZIP Code 17104 in Harrisburg has one of the largest participation gaps in Pennsylvania, with more than 1,100 children likely eligible for but not participating in WIC. This gap is the largest in the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's service territory by a wide margin; it accounts for 3.6% of the total WIC gap in the region on its own. Across the Commonwealth, the only larger gaps are found in Philadelphia and Allentown areas. ZIP Codes 17103 and 17109 in Harrisburg also have gaps of 344 and 261 children respectively, while 17057 in Middletown has a child WIC participation gap of 276.

For prioritization purposes, ZIP Codes in Dauphin County were classified into several different categories, highest, medium-high, medium-low, and lowest.

• To reach the Highest Priority ZIP Code categorization, ZIP Codes must have a child WIC participation rate below 50% and a participation gap of more 500 children or more.

• To receive a Medium-High Priority designation, ZIP Codes must have a child WIC participation rate below 75% and a participation gap of 250 children or more.

• Finally, to be classified as a Medium-Low Priority area, ZIP Codes must have a child WIC participation rate below 75% and a participation gap of 100 children or more.

As shown in the table below, only 17104 is classified as a Highest priority ZIP Code, while 17103, 17057, and 17109 are classified as Medium-High priority.

| Specific Food Preferences by Selected Race/Ethnicity and Reported Ancestry | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Overall | Hispanic | Puerto Rico | Dominican Republic |
| 1 | Meat | Meat | Meat | Meat |
| 2 | Produce | Produce | Eggs | Produce |
| 3 | Eggs | Rice | Produce | Rice |
| 4 | Milk | Eggs | Cheese | Oil |
| 5 | Rice | Oil | Rice/Bread | Eggs/Milk/Juice |

The map at right shows all ZIP Codes in Dauphin County by WIC outreach priority. In addition to the Highest and Medium-High ZIP Codes, there are five ZIPs that are categorized as Medium-Low priority areas for WIC outreach. Three of them cover large portions of northern Dauphin County: 17032 in Halifax, (179 children); 17061 in Millersburg (158 children); and 17048 in Lykens (105 children).

South of Peters Mountain, ZIP Code 17033 in Hershey has a gap of 134 children, while 17022, which is based in Elizabethtown but extends into a portion of southeastern Dauphin County, has a 331-child gap.

This map clearly shows the sheer scale of the child WIC participation gap in 17104 – the gap in this ZIP alone makes up 38% of the countywide total. Adding the three Medium-High priority areas covers more than two thirds (68%) of the total child WIC gap in the county; therefore, focusing on these four ZIP Codes, with specific emphasis on 17104, is likely to make the most effective use of outreach time and funds.

## WIC PARTICIPATION AMONG PANTRY VISITORS IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

Turning to pantry-specific findings reveals that less than a third of likely-eligible pantry visitors reported participation in WIC. While rates are low across all demographics, there are disparities by race and ethnicity. White, non-Hispanic households have the highest participation rates at 46%, compared to 32% for Black households and just 24% for Hispanic households.

Within the broader Hispanic category, there are additional differences in participation rates. These gaps represent a major opportunity for pantry and WIC providers to work together to increase participation among a population that is disproportionately likely to face food insecurity.

The chart to the right helps demonstrate the importance of increasing WIC participation among eligible households.

**Priority ZIP Codes for WIC Outreach and Child WIC Participation Gap, Dauphin County**
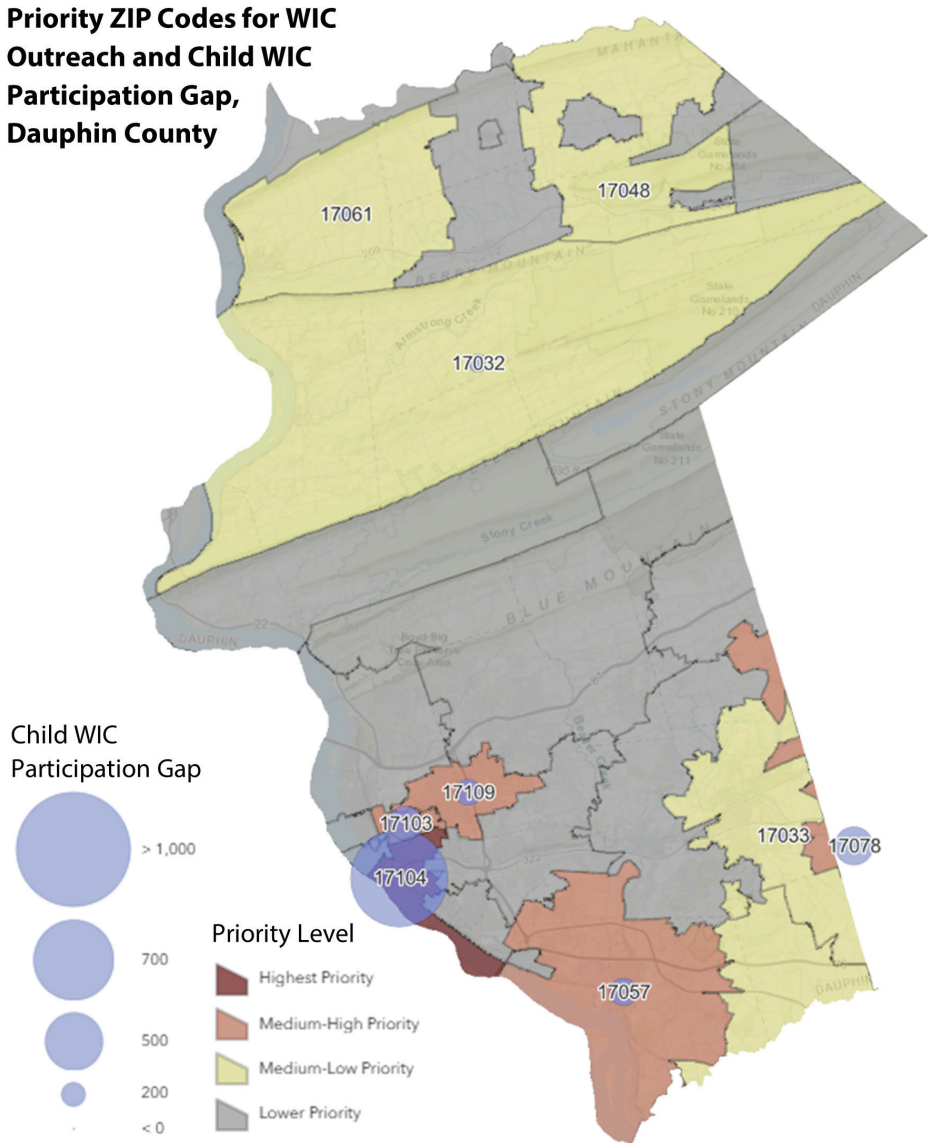


Child WIC Participation Gap

> 1,000
700
500
200
< 0

Priority Level

- Highest Priority
- Medium-High Priority
- Medium-Low Priority
- Lower Priority

**WIC Participation among Likely-Eligible Pantry Visitor Households in Dauphin County**



| Overall | Black | Hispanic | White |
|---------|-------|----------|-------|
| 32% | 32% | 24% | 46% |
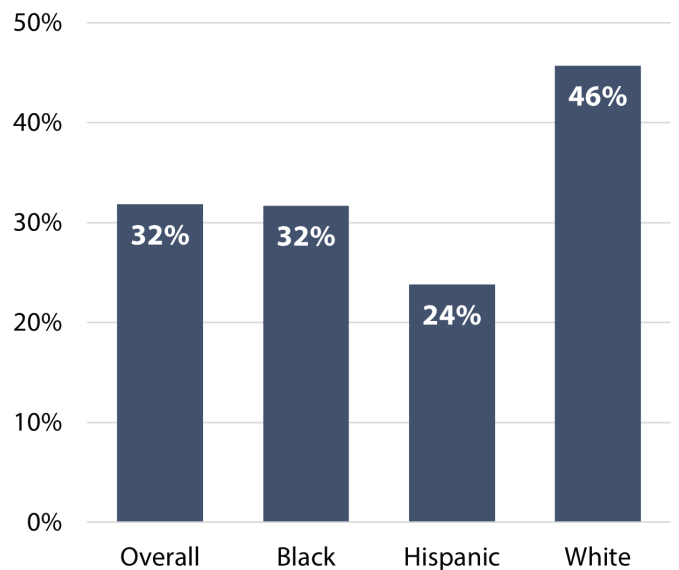
**Very Low Food Security Rate
by WIC Participation among
Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors**
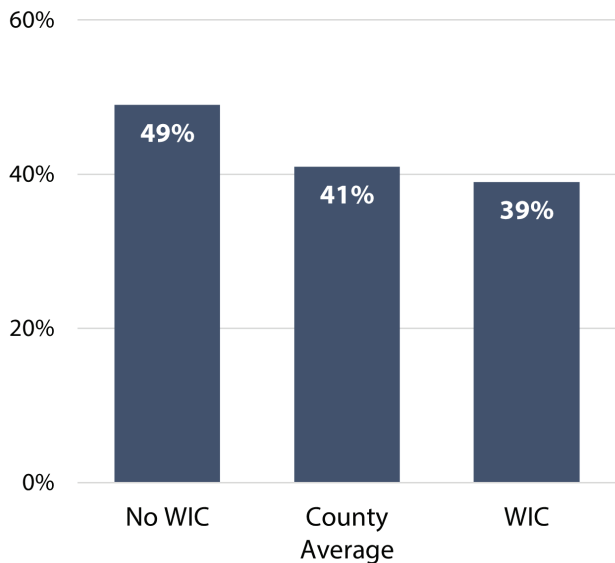


Likely-eligible households who participate in WIC have very low food security rates 20% lower than likely-eligible households who do not participate, at 39% versus 49%. Participating in WIC takes likely-eligible households from having very low food security rates well above the 41% rate among all Dauphin County pantry visitors to a rate that is below that average. The clear positive impact of WIC on food security status means that it is one of the major tools stakeholders should use to its fullest extent when working to reduce food insecurity across the county.

## 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.[29,30] The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides free or low-cost meals and snacks to children in daycares and after-school programs, children in emergency shelters, and disabled adults in day care programs.[31] The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO), or SUN Meals, allow community organizations and school food authorities to provide meals in summer when schools are closed.[32] This analysis focuses on the programs for which school food authorities are intended to be the primary sponsor, which are NSLP, SBP, and SUN Meals.

## COUNTY, SPONSOR, AND BUILDING-LEVEL SCHOOL MEAL PARTICIPATION

As of October 2023, average daily breakfast and lunch participation rates among Dauphin County's public schools stood at 38.3% and 64.4% respectively. Average daily participation is calculated for public schools in accordance with methods used by the Food Research and Action Center by dividing the number of total monthly meals served by service day, then dividing again by enrollment to produce an estimate of the proportion of students who receive a meal on an average day. This analysis includes Williams Valley and Susquenita School Districts, which serve some of Dauphin County's children despite being based in Schuylkill and Perry counties respectively.

As shown in the graph below, Dauphin County outpaced the statewide average participation rates for both meals among comparable schools, but performance in lunch was especially strong. Children attending a public school in Dauphin County were around 3% more likely to participate in breakfast than children statewide, but for lunch, they were nearly 9% more likely to participate.

**2023 Average Daily Meal Participation Rates in
Dauphin County and Pennsylvania Public Schools**
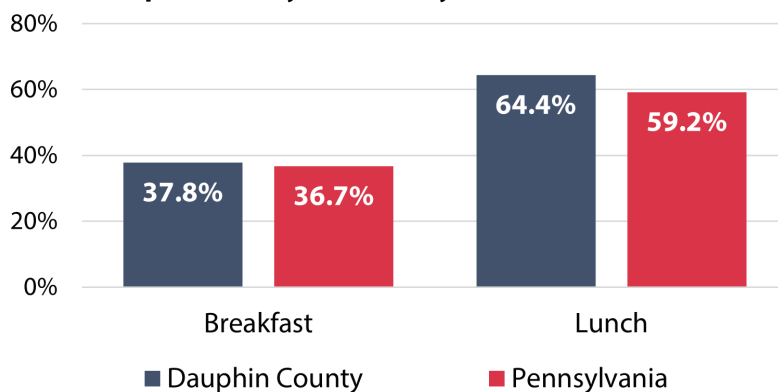


This divergence between Dauphin County and the state in lunch participation is likely due, at least in part, to substantial utilization of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast by county schools. CEP allows high-poverty schools and school districts to provide free meals without requiring families to apply and prove they have incomes below 185% of the federal poverty level, which reduces administrative burdens for both students and staff.

| 2023 Average Daily School Meal Participation by Dauphin County School Meal Sponsor | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sponsor | Percent of School-Aged (6-17) Children under 185% FPL (2022 5-Year ACS) | Participated in CEP? | Breakfast ADP | Lunch ADP |
| Central Dauphin School District | 23.3% | Yes, some schools | 39.7% | 66.1% |
| Dauphin County Technical School | N/A | Yes, all schools | 46.7% | 70.1% |
| Derry Township School District | 12.2% | No | 25.1% | 44.4% |
| Halifax Area School District | 39.0% | No | 38.5% | 71.4% |
| Harrisburg City School District | 65.1% | Yes, all schools | 48.8% | 73.2% |
| Lower Dauphin School District | 9.8% | No | 19.7% | 54.0% |
| Middletown Area School District | 37.5% | No | 44.8% | 66.2% |
| Millersburg Area School District | 42.6% | No | 28.3% | 53.7% |
| Steelton-Highspire School District | 62.4% | Yes, all schools | 38.5% | 69.7% |
| Susquehanna Township School District | 37.8% | No | 41.6% | 65.1% |
| Susquenita School District | 29.4% | No | 21.5% | 57.6% |
| Upper Dauphin Area School District | 41.4% | No | 28.7% | 60.3% |
| Williams Valley School District | 36.8% | Yes, all schools | 39.2% | 73.9% |
| **Countywide** | - | - | **37.8%** | **64.4%** |

Schools and districts may opt into CEP if they are able to prove that at least 25% of their students are 'categorically eligible' for free or reduced-price lunch based on participation in one of several other programs such as SNAP or Medical Assistance or status as a Head Start, homeless, migrant, or foster student. As of 2023, most schools in Central Dauphin School District, all schools in Harrisburg City School District, Steelton-Highspire School District, and Williams Valley School District participated in CEP. Several of these schools and districts are quite large, so overall, nearly half (47.9%) of Dauphin County students were eligible for free lunch regardless of income and without needing to complete an application.

Even considering Dauphin County's strong performance in school meal participation, there is still room for improvement, as significant disparities in participation between Dauphin County schools and districts remain.

The table above highlights disparities by showing each school district or independent school with above-average participation rates for a particular meal service in green and below-average participation rates in red. Please note that income-eligibility estimates come from the American Communities Survey; data limitations therefore require that school-aged be defined as aged 6-17. However, ACS data does not account for public-school *attendance,* meaning that the below figures are inclusive of students who reside within a district's boundaries but are homeschooled or attending private or cyber schools. However, these estimates are still useful in providing a general idea of the proportion of free- and reduced-eligible children within a district regardless of CEP status.

Harrisburg City School District and Dauphin County Technical School had high participation rates for both meal services, while Derry Township School District, Lower Dauphin School District, Millersburg Area School District, Susquenita School District, and Upper Dauphin School District all had participation rates well below average for both breakfast in lunch. Notably, all sponsors and districts with strong performance in both meal services participated in CEP, while all sponsors and districts with weak performance did not. With that said, CEP participation alone is by no means a guarantor of success, as evidenced by middling rates at Steelton-Highspire School District in both meal services and for breakfast at Williams Valley School District.

### The Impact of Universal School Breakfast in Dauphin County

In fall 2022, the Wolf administration announced a $21 million investment in Pennsylvania's children by providing free breakfast to all students at schools participating in the School Breakfast Program without the need for families to complete an application and regardless of a school's CEP participation.[33] Governor Shapiro's administration continued the program in 2023 and expanded it to eliminate the reduced-price lunch category.[34] Over that time frame, universal breakfast has had a major impact on participation in Dauphin County's public schools.

**Average Daily Breakfast Participation in Dauphin County and Pennsylvania, 2019-2023**
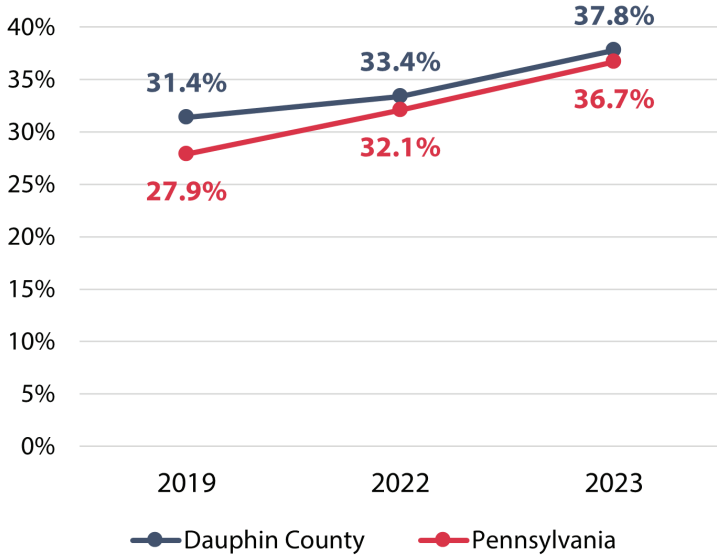


As of October 2023, breakfast participation across Dauphin County's public schools had increased more than six percentage points, or nearly 20% over 2019, the last year prior to the universal breakfast program for which reliable data is available. In that same time frame, lunch participation remained flat, which is compelling evidence that the universal breakfast program is the primary driver of participation growth.

As large as this increase was, it was still smaller than the scale of statewide breakfast growth; across Pennsylvania, breakfast participation increased 31.8%, or almost nine percentage points, from 27.9% to 36.7% between 2019 and 2022.

Similar to Dauphin County's overperformance in lunch participation as discussed in the previous section, this divergence in breakfast growth is primarily because many of the county's schools, covering about 42% of students, participated in CEP as of 2019. These schools were already offering free breakfast without the need for an application and had elevated participation rates as a result, well before universal breakfast became available statewide.

However, there is still room for improvement in many schools, and breakfast participation continues to be substantially lower than that of lunch across all schools and sponsors. One way to address this gap could be to encourage the implementation of alternative breakfast models, such as breakfast in the classroom or grab-and-go breakfast. Of the 70 total public schools serving Dauphin County students, only 40 (57%) had implemented alternative breakfast as of 2023. Alternative breakfast service has been shown in multiple research studies to meaningfully increase participation[35] and could be an effective way to expand access and uptake inside schools.

## Building-Level Breakfast Participation

Universal school breakfast has made a major difference in participation across Dauphin County's public schools, but there is still space to grow, as breakfast participation across the county is still only about half that of lunch.

The map below shows all county public schools by average daily breakfast participation rate and enrollment size. Schools with larger enrollments are drawn larger on the map than are schools with fewer students, while schools with above-average participation rates are shown in blue and those with below-average participation rates are shown in red.

**2023 School Breakfast Participation and Total Enrollment by School Building**
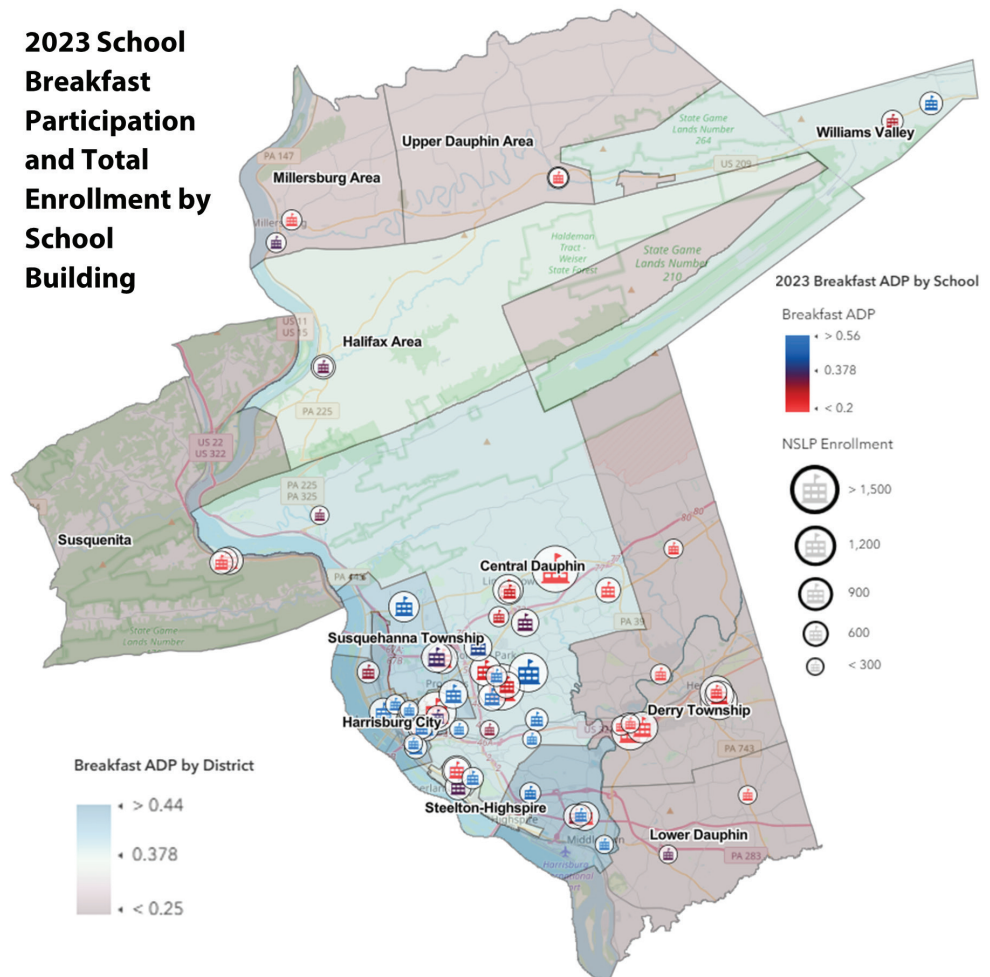
This map reveals that even in high-performing districts such as Harrisburg City School District and Williams Valley School District, many individual schools still have low participation rates and could see significant benefit from focused school breakfast outreach and implementation of strategies to increase participation.

Looking more closely at the data reveals that many, though not all, of the schools that are most prominent in this map share several commonalities. Seventeen (81.0%) of the 21 Dauphin County public schools with breakfast ADP rates below 25% do not participate in CEP, and fifteen (71.4%) do not offer alternative breakfast models. Twelve (57.1%) are intermediate or secondary schools. Specific building-level data is available on request.

## SUN MEAL SITE LOCATION ANALYSIS

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the National School Lunch Program are federally funded child congregate meal programs intended to alleviate child food insecurity in the summer, when schools are not open and school breakfasts and lunches are not available.[36] These programs, referred to collectively as SUN Meals, are crucial supports at a time when children, who are already much more likely than average to face food insecurity, are at most risk of going hungry.

SUN Meal sites are broadly similar and will generally be referred to under this term for that reason throughout this section, but there are distinctions between SFSP and SSO that may occasionally be relevant. For example, both school districts and community organizations may sponsor SFSP sites, while only school food authorities can take advantage of SSO to provide year-round meal service with a minimum of administrative barriers.[37]

In general, SUN Meal 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. Census tracts that qualify in 2024 are shown in blue on the map below. Sites can become individually eligible if they are close enough to an individual school that qualifies 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 SFSP site eligibility, please see the Pennsylvania Department of Education.[38]

This analysis uses site data from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). At the state level, these programs are administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE.) The map uses area eligibility data provided by No Kid Hungry in conjunction with rural eligibility data available from USDA.
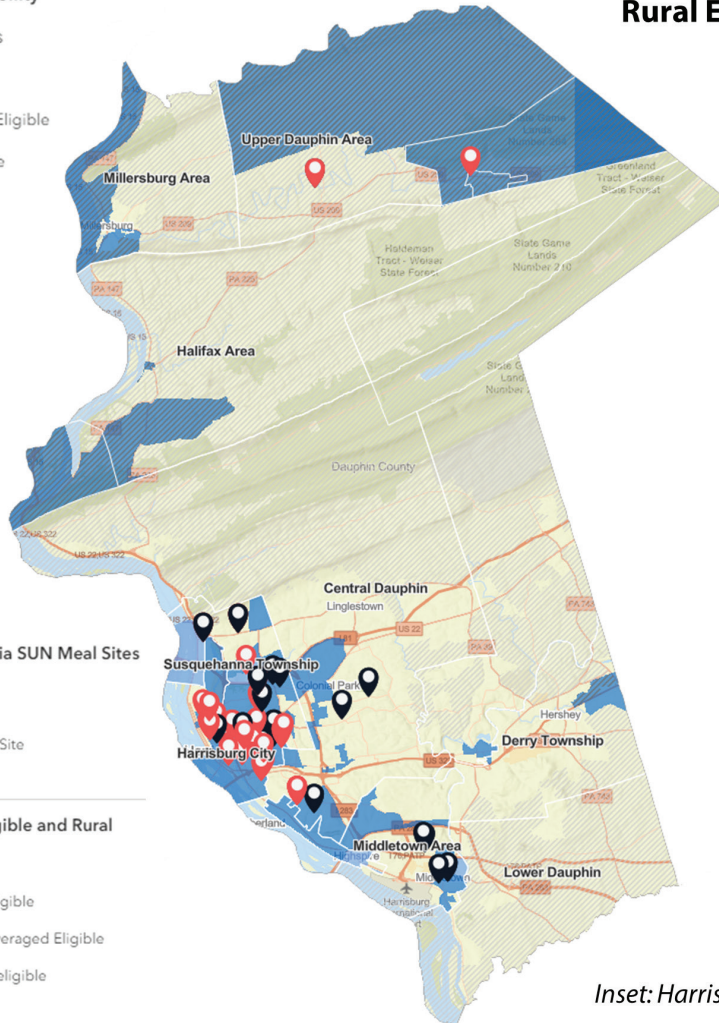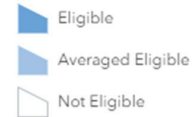
There were 53 SUN Meal sites across Dauphin County in Summer 2023. Of these, the vast majority (34 sites) were sponsored by the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Susquehanna Township School District was the next largest sponsor with six sites, followed by Harrisburg City School District with five, Middletown Area School District with four, Central Dauphin School District with two, and Dauphin County Technical School and the Harrisburg Area YMCA with one each. All sites sponsored by school districts operated under SSO, while those sponsored by community organizations operated under SFSP. All 53 sites across the county operated as open sites; any child could receive a meal without needing to pre-register or be part of a specific program.

SUN meal service ran for an average of 6.75 weeks across the county. The longest-running site operated for more than eleven weeks, and the shortest-running ran for just three days. Most started in June and ended in August, the core SUN Meal distribution months, though there was one site that began in May and a handful of sites that concluded services in June or July.

**Summer 2024 SUN Meal Sites, Area Eligibility, and Rural Eligibility, Dauphin County and Harrisburg**

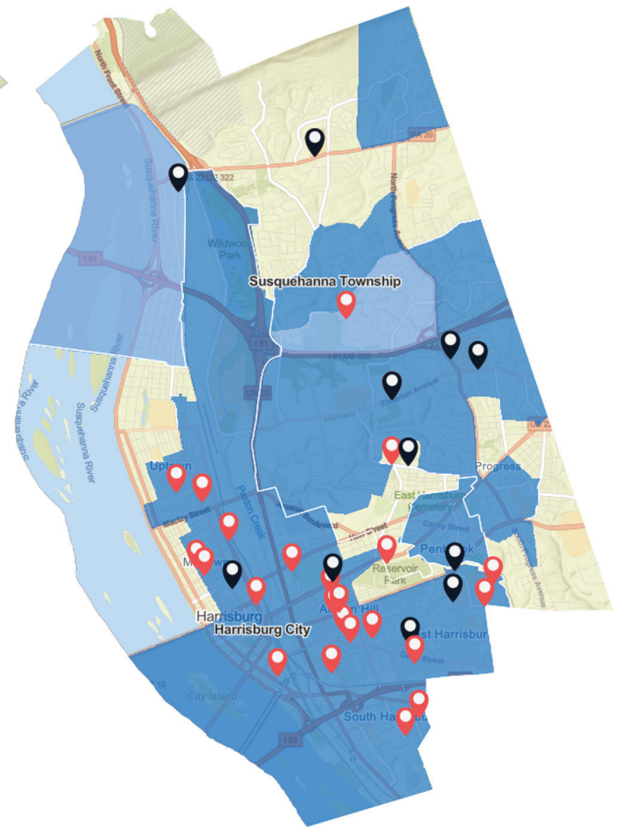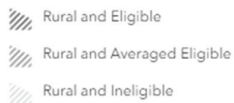FY2024 Area Eligibility and Averaged Eligibility

Eligibility Status

- Eligible
- Averaged Eligible
- Not Eligible

2024 Pennsylvania SUN Meal Sites

- CPFB
- Non-Partner Site

FY2024 Area Eligible and Rural

Status

- Rural and Eligible
- Rural and Averaged Eligible
- Rural and Ineligible

*Inset: Harrisburg, Penbrook Borough, and Susquehanna Township*

SUN meal sites were not evenly distributed across Dauphin County. Most sites were in the Harrisburg area, with 25 (47% of county total) within the Harrisburg City School District and another nine (17%) in Susquehanna Township School District. There were four sites each in Central Dauphin School District and Middletown Area School District. In northern Dauphin County, Upper Dauphin Area School District and the Dauphin County portion of Williams Valley School District each had one site.

Districts with large eligible areas but no SUN Meal sites within their borders included Steelton-Highspire, Halifax Area, and Millersburg Area, as well as the Dauphin County portion of Susquenita School District. Derry Township and the northern portion of Lower Dauphin have small eligible areas and without a SUN Meal site. Of these areas, Steelton-Highspire and Hummelstown are the most likely to be a good match for traditional on-site SUN Meal service, as they are all relatively dense and potentially walkable; transportation to the meal site is less likely to be a barrier to service in this area than in more suburban or rural areas.

Several of the other districts that lack a SUN Meal site but that have eligible census tracts could potentially participate under the new non-congregate rural rule introduced in 2022. The new rule allows sites to package meals in bundles for offsite consumption over the course of up to a week, easing the transportation burden that a site that requires daily attendance imposes upon children and guardians. Districts that have eligible tracts to which this rule applies include Millersburg Area, Upper Dauphin, Halifax Area, Derry Township, and the Dauphin County portions of Susquenita and Williams Valley. In all these districts, even the ones that already have traditional SUN Meal sites, to-go meals could be powerful tools to increase access and participation.
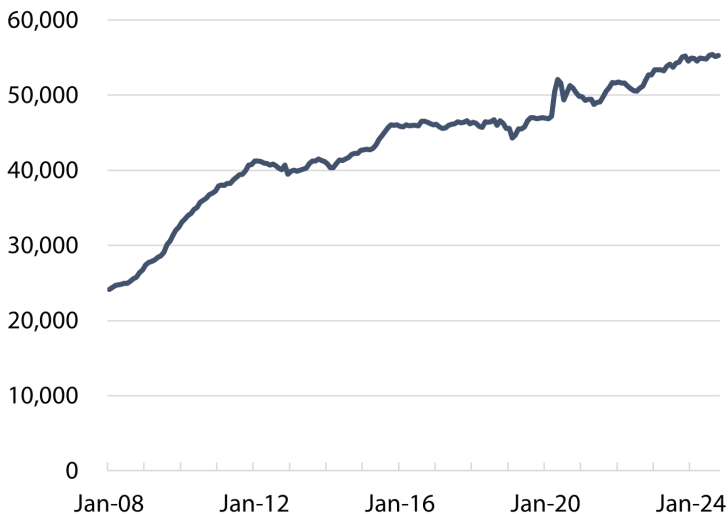
## SNAP Participation

SNAP is by far the largest and most important nutrition assistance program in the United States; it has been shown in many studies to reduce very low food security by substantial margins.[39] In terms of funding, SNAP is four times larger than NSLP, twelve times larger than WIC, and 80 times larger than TEFAP as of FY2019.

SNAP is a vital resource for low-income households. 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 many grocery retailers. Because EBT works like cash, recipients have the freedom to choose items that suit their preferences, meet specific dietary needs, and budget their own spending over time. SNAP thus promotes dignity, autonomy, and choice, making it an especially well-designed program.

55,254 Dauphin County residents participated in SNAP as of October 2024, which equates to almost a fifth of the county's total population at 19.1%. These figures are near the all-time high for SNAP participation in the county in terms of both rate and number of individuals.

In Dauphin County, as in nearly every other county across Pennsylvania, SNAP participation increased dramatically during the Great Recession. However, unlike much of the rest of the Commonwealth, Dauphin County's SNAP participation rate never declined much during the slow economic recovery or beyond. SNAP participation in Dauphin County increased 56% between 2009 and 2014 and has climbed another 29% since 2015. Participation has remained elevated in the past several years; this is due to both increased need in the county and state-level administrative and programmatic changes to SNAP that expanded eligibility and made the application process simpler in Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania is one of the highest performing states in terms of SNAP participation rates, outperforming 42 other states according to a recent USDA report.[40] Relative to the rest of the Commonwealth, Dauphin County is especially high performing at second overall, behind only Greene County. Dauphin thereby leads the CPFB's service territory in SNAP participation; it also ranks significantly higher statewide than most of its neighbors, except for Northumberland, which is close behind at fourth overall.

Overall, though SNAP participation is clearly one of Dauphin County's major strengths, there is still room for improvement in targeted areas across the county.

### ZIP CODE-LEVEL SNAP PARTICIPATION GAPS IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

To determine potential geographic areas of focus for SNAP outreach, this analysis utilizes a novel eligibility determination technique, with two underlying methods combined to determine priority ZIP Codes for outreach based on SNAP participation gaps and participation rates at both individual and family levels.

**Priority ZIP Codes for SNAP Outreach, Dauphin County**



### Number of Individuals Receiving SNAP in Dauphin County, 2008-2024
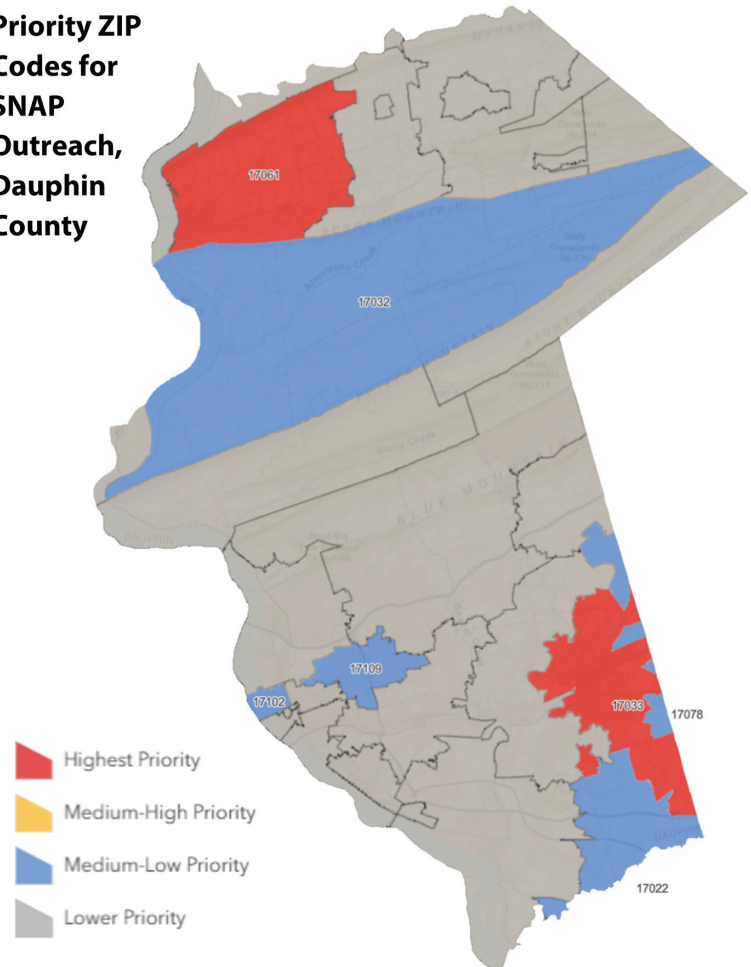
| Dauphin County Priority ZIP Codes for SNAP Outreach | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Priority Level | ZIP Code | PO Name | Family SNAP Gap | Family SNAP Participation Rate | Individual SNAP Gap | Individual SNAP Participation Rate |
| Highest | 17061 | Millersburg | 187 | 57% | 997 | 44% |
| Highest | 17033 | Hershey | 228 | 47% | 1,352 | 46% |
| Medium-Low | 17102 | Harrisburg | 118 | 74% | 440 | 84% |
| Medium-Low | 17109 | Harrisburg | 402 | 58% | 435 | 92% |

First, the analysis uses 2022 5-Year American Community Survey (ACS) estimates for family SNAP participation and family ratio of income to poverty levels to analyze SNAP participation gaps at the county and sub-county levels. The analysis uses families (a group of two or more related people living together)[41] as a main unit of analysis to avoid under-estimating SNAP participation in areas with significant college populations, as college students have more eligibility restrictions for SNAP and may skew individual SNAP participation estimates conducted using income alone.

Second, the family-level SNAP participation estimates are combined with individual-level SNAP participation estimates, which uses both 2022 5-Year ACS individual ratio of income to poverty level estimates for individuals with incomes below 150% of the federal poverty level and current Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA DHS) SNAP data. Areas with significant gaps in both measures are identified as either an area of the Highest Priority, Medium-High Priority, or Medium-Low Priority. The results of the analysis produce an overestimate of participation rates because it uses income lower than the gross income eligibility threshold of 200% in Pennsylvania. This intentional bias provides additional confidence that any participation gaps identified are significant. The resulting priority categorizations are as follows:

• To reach the Highest Priority ZIP Code categorization, ZIP Codes must have family utilization gaps over 100 families, individual utilization gaps over 500 persons, and utilization rates under 75% for both measures.

• To receive a Medium-High Priority designation, ZIP Codes must have a family participation gap of at least 50 families, individual participation gap of at least 250 persons, along with SNAP utilization rates below 50%.
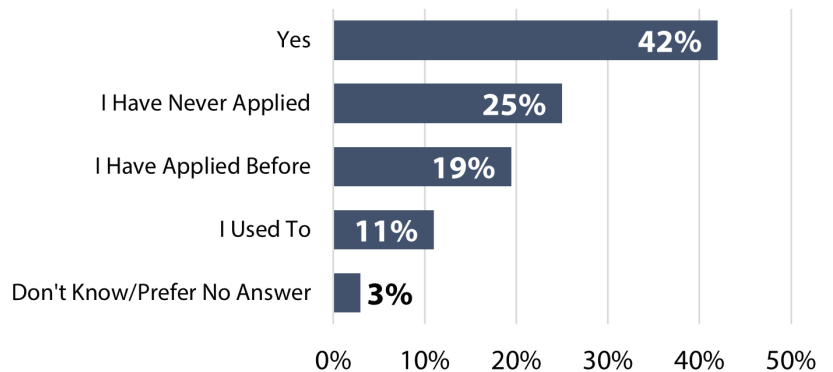
• Finally, to be classified as a Medium-Low Priority area, ZIP Codes must have participation gaps of more than 50 families and more than 250 individuals.

The results show that ZIP codes 17033 in Hershey and 17061 in Millersburg are both classified as Highest Priority ZIP Codes for geographic-based SNAP outreach efforts. ZIP Codes 17109 and 17102 in Harrisburg as well as ZIP Codes 17022 in Elizabethtown (including parts of Lancaster County) and 17078 in Palmyra (primarily covering Lebanon County) are all classified as Medium-Low Priority ZIP Codes.
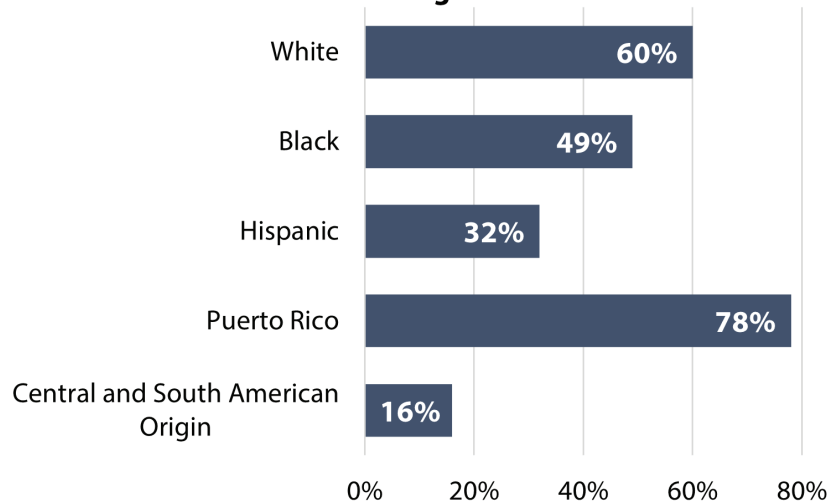
## SNAP PARTICIPATION AMONG FOOD PANTRY VISITORS IN DAUPHIN COUNTY

Although SNAP participation across Dauphin County is high, less than half of food pantry visitors reported receiving SNAP, with a countywide average of just 42%. Of the pantry visitors who said they do not receive SNAP, one in four (25%) have never applied for SNAP, while just under one in five (19%) have applied, and about one in ten (11%) participated in the past.

**SNAP Receipt and Application History Among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| Yes | 42% |
| I Have Never Applied | 25% |
| I Have Applied Before | 19% |
| I Used To | 11% |
| Don't Know/Prefer No Answer | 3% |

**Dauphin County Pantry Visitor SNAP Participation by Race/Ethnicity and Hispanic Origin**

| Race/Ethnicity | Participation |
|---|---|
| White | 60% |
| Black | 49% |
| Hispanic | 32% |
| Puerto Rico | 78% |
| Central and South American Origin | 16% |

Many among this last group of pantry visitors expressed confusion about the recertification process, with one neighbor summing up their experience by saying, "I tried getting into COMPASS [the online SNAP application portal]. I got to a question I didn't understand and couldn't do more." Situations like the one described by this neighbor indicate that there are opportunities for interested parties to help with recertifications and ensure benefits are not stopped for purely administrative reasons.

There are significant differences in SNAP participation by Dauphin County region and by pantry visitor race or ethnicity. Rural Dauphin County pantries have an average SNAP participation rate of 48%, while the average among Urban/Suburban pantries is 40% and the Harrisburg average is 42%.

These differences are likely driven in large part by demographic variation across the different regions of Dauphin County. For example, 78% of Rural Dauphin County pantry visitors are white, and the white, non-Hispanic SNAP participation rate is the highest of any racial or ethnic group in the county at 60%.

By comparison, SNAP participation rates are 49% for Black households and just 32% for Hispanic households. These low participation rates exist in the context of at least 85% of pantry visitors in Dauphin County likely being income-eligible for SNAP at the 200% of the federal poverty level threshold and 75% having incomes below 150% of the federal poverty level.

This finding highlights that other considerations must be made around SNAP eligibility, as the program has complex eligibility standards that take factors such as household composition and status into account in addition to income.

The fact that factors beyond income help to determine SNAP participation among pantry visitors in Dauphin County is illustrated in the chart above. Participation rates are consistent across income categories for households with incomes at or below 200% of the poverty level; this trend differs from SNAP participation trends seen in other counties. Typically, households with incomes below the poverty level are much more likely to participate in SNAP because they are much more likely to meet the net income test (net income below poverty) than households with incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level.[42]

**SNAP Participation among Food Pantry Visitors by Dauphin County Region**

| Region | Participation |
|---|---|
| Overall | 42% |
| Harrisburg | 42% |
| Urban/Surburban Dauphin County | 40% |
| Rural Dauphin County | 48% |
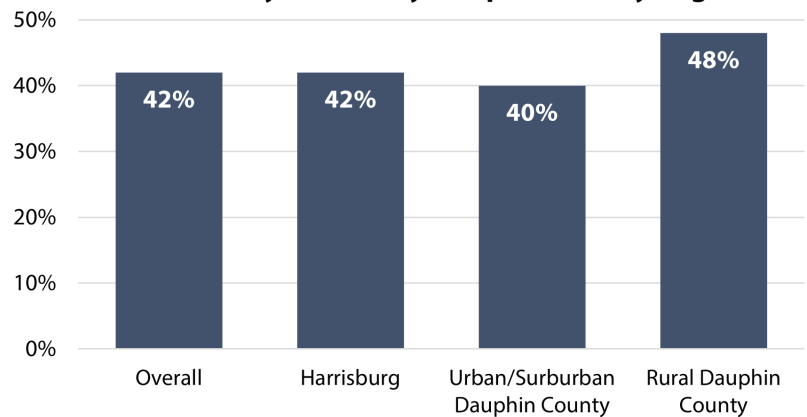
**Dauphin County Pantry Visitor SNAP Participation by Income Threshold**

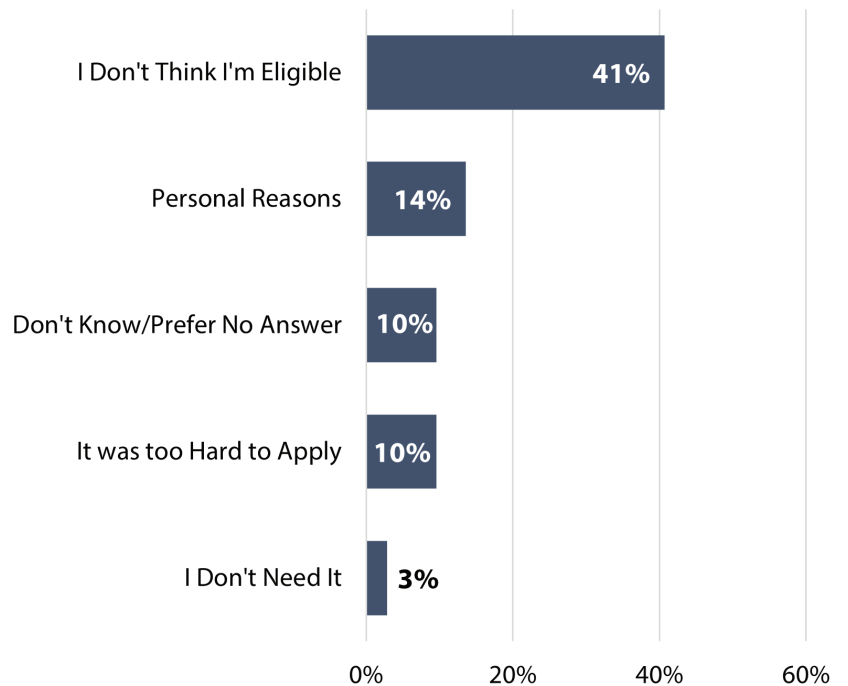| Income Threshold | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Below Poverty Level | 45% |
| 100% to 150% of the Poverty Level | 47% |
| 150% to 200% of the Poverty Level | 46% |
| Over 200% of the Poverty Level | 17% |
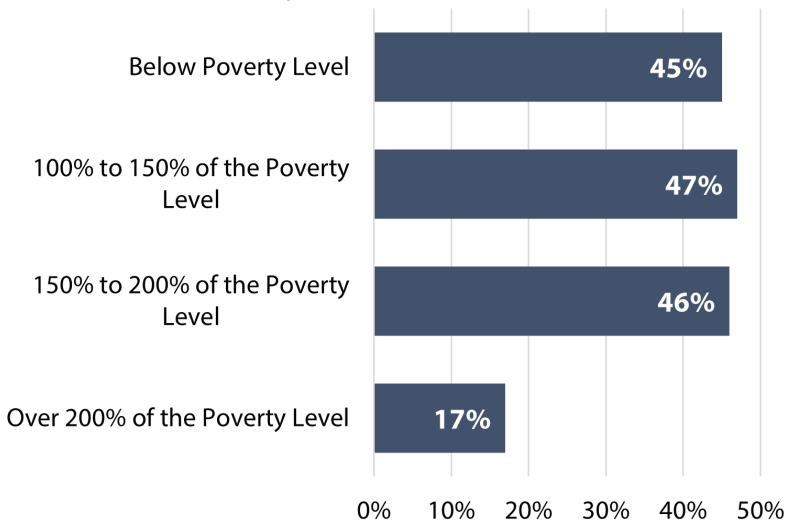
*" Very thankful for food banks with good options as far as food.*
*Now that I'm working, my food stamps got cut from $535 to $178 and we spend $178 in one trip.*
*Very thankful for the food."*
*– Pantry Visitor*

If income were the primary determinant of SNAP participation in Dauphin County, households with incomes below the poverty line would have the highest rates of SNAP participation, with gradual declines for SNAP participation for incomes thereafter. However, this is not what is occurring among pantry visitors in Dauphin County; the divergence from the norm provides strong evidence that other factors are driving SNAP participation in the county.

The most common response Dauphin County pantry visitors who had never applied for SNAP gave when asked why they had not done so was that they do not think they are eligible. This could be due to income or other reasons. About 14% of food pantry visitors who have never applied for SNAP cited personal reasons, while 10% said that it was too hard to apply.

Despite some of the complicating factors around applying for and eligibility for SNAP, at least 25% of pantry visitors have never applied for and are not participating in SNAP, meaning there is still likely a substantial opportunity to meaningfully increase SNAP participation among at least a quarter of pantry visitors.

**Reasons Cited for Not Applying for SNAP among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| Reason | Percentage |
|---|---|
| I Don't Think I'm Eligible | 41% |
| Personal Reasons | 14% |
| Don't Know/Prefer No Answer | 10% |
| It was too Hard to Apply | 10% |
| I Don't Need It | 3% |

# Recommendations on the Utilization of Government Programs

**Section 3 Finding 1:   Increasing WIC participation among pantry visitors in Dauphin County represents a major opportunity to increase food access among the most vulnerable households.** WIC reduces very low food security among likely-eligible households, but less than a third of likely-eligible pantry visitors participate. Participation rates for Hispanic households are especially low at 24%.

At the ZIP Code level, the largest WIC participation gaps exist in ZIP Code 17104, 17109, and 17103, all in and around the city of Harrisburg. ZIP Code 17104 has the most severe gap in Dauphin County by far, making up nearly 40% of the child WIC participation gap across the county.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders across Dauphin County should work to increase awareness and participation in the WIC program among likely eligible households, especially in the identified ZIP Codes. Pantries represent especially well-targeted locations within these ZIP Codes and across the county to conduct WIC outreach.

Located near the intersection of 17104 and 17103 in Harrisburg, the WIC office in Dauphin County is uniquely well-positioned to reach non-participating households. WIC mobile clinics have had success in expanding outreach and enrollment resources to more locations. This could be useful in parts of these ZIP Codes that are outside of walking distance to the WIC office, as well as in other locations across Dauphin County.

**Section 3 Finding 2:  School breakfast and lunch participation in Dauphin County is above the statewide average.** Dauphin County's strong performance in school meal participation is likely a reflection of the disproportionate number of schools able to offer free lunch to all their students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), as nearly half of children live in school districts that participate in CEP.

Though Dauphin County's schools are already doing well, efforts to increase breakfast uptake could make tremendous impact countywide. Breakfast participation rates are about 40% lower than lunch participation rates, even though breakfast is free to all Pennsylvania public school students regardless of their school's use of CEP or their own individual eligibility status. The districts with the most room to grow their breakfast participation in Dauphin County include Lower Dauphin and Susquenita – both have rates around half of the countywide average.

There are also more than 20 individual schools, most of which are secondary schools and some of which are part of broadly high-performing school districts, that could increase breakfast participation substantially from their current rates of 25% or below.

Most of the rest of the school districts in Dauphin County had large eligible areas but lacked SUN Meal sites. Many districts, especially those in northern Dauphin County, also have sizable areas categorized as rural by USDA, which could allow non-congregate SUN meal sites to operate in the region; such sites are permitted to provide meals in bulk for offsite consumption, which could help ease access barriers for children who cannot easily transport themselves to a site.

**Recommendation:** Efforts should be made to offer SUN Meal sites in Steelton-Highspire School District, which has wide areas of eligibility and is dense enough for traditional meal service to be viable. Hummelstown borough, inside Lower Dauphin School District, may also be a good candidate for traditional SUN Meal site expansion.

Other school districts with large eligible areas but few or no site especially concentrated in northern Dauphin County, including Millersburg Area, Halifax Area, Upper Dauphin, and Williams Valley, could utilize the new rural non-congregate rule to expand access to children with transportation barriers.

• • • • •

**Section 3 Finding 4: SNAP participation in Dauphin County overall is the second highest in all of Pennsylvania, a major strength of food access work in Dauphin County.** On the other hand, participation in SNAP among food pantry visitors is consistently below 50%. There may be some opportunity to increase SNAP participation among likely eligible households.

However, a significant number of these non-participating households may not be eligible for SNAP because they either cannot meet the documentation requirements or because they have incomes above the qualifying threshold. This is evidenced by SNAP participation having little to no correlation to income among pantry visitors with incomes below 200% of the poverty level.

There are two ZIP Codes across Dauphin County identified as high-priority ZIP Codes, including 17061 in Millersburg and 17033 in Hershey. These ZIP Codes have around 200 families and 1,000 individuals who are likely eligible but not participating in SNAP.

**Recommendation:** County, pantries still represent well-targeted areas for SNAP outreach. Pantries across the county, but especially in Millersburg and Hershey, should ensure that they have referral processes for people who may be eligible for SNAP to learn about the program and to contact appropriate helplines that can assess eligibility and provide application assistance, including the one operated by the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Healthcare organizations are trusted partners in this space and also have a role to play in working to increase SNAP participation.

**Recommendation:** Dauphin County schools should implement strategies proven to increase participation in school meals, with specific emphasis on breakfast in light of the program's universality. Universality benefits both students, who can access meals without paperwork requirements, and schools, which can increase their reimbursements for program operation thanks to higher participation.[43]

Fifteen (71.4%) of the 21 Dauphin County public schools with breakfast participation rates of 25% or less do not offer alternative breakfast models. Multiple alternative service models have been shown by research to increase participation, and stakeholders should encourage these schools to utilize them. Specific models include breakfast in the classroom and breakfast after the bell, which make breakfast an official part of the school day, and grab-and-go or second-chance breakfast, which allow students to receive breakfast in a more flexible manner than do traditional service methods.[44]

• • • • •

**Section 3 Finding 3: SUN Meal sites were concentrated in Harrisburg and its suburbs in Summer 2024, with nearly half (47%) in the Harrisburg City School District boundaries and another 17% in Susquehanna Township School District.** The remaining SUN meal sites were found in Middletown Area, Central Dauphin, Upper Dauphin, and Williams Valley.
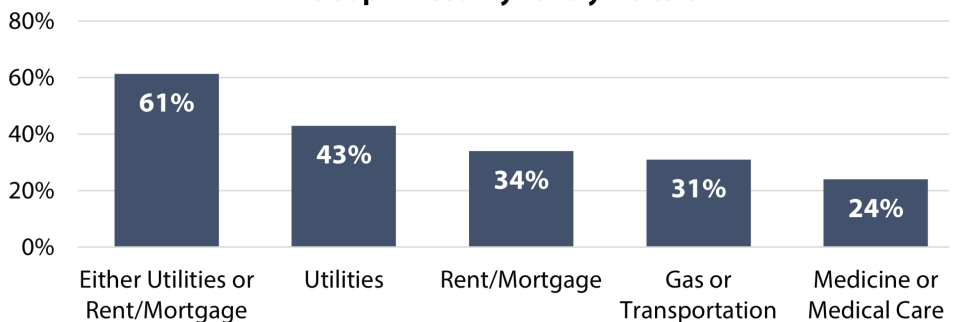
## Drivers of Food Insecurity

To better understand the root causes of food insecurity in Dauphin County, this section combines extensive secondary data analysis with primary data from food pantry visitor surveys collected at pantries throughout the region. 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 or ethnicity.[45,46]  Food insecurity is inversely related to household income, making poverty status and the ratio of income to the poverty level some of the strongest predictors of food insecurity status.[47] Homeownership and housing insecurity are also strong predictors of household food insecurity,[48] and several of these underlying factors vary dramatically by race and ethnicity in Dauphin County, making them key contributors to the disparate food insecurity rates seen among different racial and ethnic groups.

Overall, this analysis finds several key upstream and intersecting factors contributing to food insecurity in Dauphin County, including housing costs, transportation, financial access, and health care conditions and costs.

This finding is reflected in the most common economic tradeoffs with food reported by pantry visitors. Housing and housing-related costs are the most common tradeoffs pantry visitors must make; more than two in five survey respondents indicated they had to choose between groceries and utilities. Rent or mortgage and gas or transportation both come in close behind, with about a third of pantry visitors having reported making tradeoffs with these items and food.

**Economic Tradeoffs with Food among
Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| Either Utilities or Rent/Mortgage | 61% |
| Utilities | 43% |
| Rent/Mortgage | 34% |
| Gas or Transportation | 31% |
| Medicine or Medical Care | 24% |

**Very Low Food Security by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| Below Poverty Level | 50% |
| 100% to 150% of the Poverty Level | 38% |
| 150% to 200% of the Poverty Level | 31% |
| Over 200% of the Poverty Level | 11% |

0%   20%   40%   60%
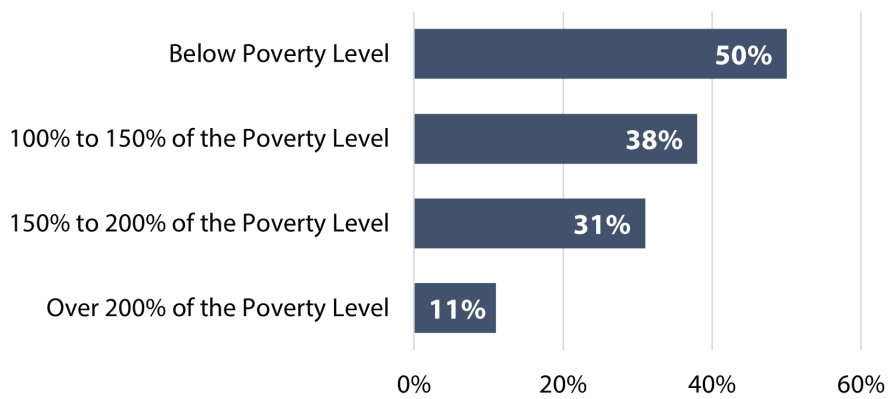
## INCOME SOURCES

Nationally, the strongest predictor of very low food security status is household income, and this relationship holds true in Dauphin County. Half of the county's pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty line experience very low food security, but the likelihood of facing very low food security progressively decreases as income increases.

As shown in the figure above, households with incomes below the federal poverty level (FPL) have a very low food security rate of 50%, markedly higher than the 38% rate for households between 100% and 150% FPL. The very low food security rate continues to drop as income rises, falling to 31% for households between 150% and 200% FPL and just 11% for households with incomes at or above 200% FPL.

The main income source for food pantry visitors in Dauphin County is full-time work. Most pantry visitors who are able to work do so. A total of 73% of pantry visitors reported working full-time, receiving Social Security or Pension or receiving Disability or SSI. An additional 11% reported working part-time, while just 12% said that none of these are their sources of income. This 12% includes households that fall into various unearned income categories, such as spousal/child support or Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF, or "cash assistance" benefits) which do not have their own discrete income category in the survey. These findings demonstrate that unemployment is a minimal contributor to the overall need for charitable food in Dauphin County.

There are major differences in income source by household type. Households with children are the most likely to have shared that they are working, while senior households are the most likely to have said they receive Social Security. Seniors and working-age households without children are similarly likely to receive Disability or SSI.

Disability status is one of the most common reasons food pantry visitors gave when asked if they had not worked at some point in the last 12 months across all household types, even when considering that more than half of seniors cited retirement as the main reason for not working. A total of 43% of households without children, 28% of senior households, and 21% of households with children reported not working due to a disability at some point in the last 12 months. Around a fifth (18%) of pantry-visitor households with children cited taking care of family as the main reason. 14% of both households without children and households with children reported being laid off or not being able to find work; among senior households, this rate was only 5%.

People who reported being ill or disabled have among the highest rates of very low food security among pantry visitors, at 50%, second only to people who said they had been laid off or were unable to find work at 52%.

**Very Low Food Security by Main Reason for Not Working at Some Point in the Last 12 Months among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| Retired | 28% |
| Ill or Disabled | 50% |
| No Weeks Not Working | 36% |
| Taking Care of Family | 43% |
| Laid Off/Could Not Find | 52% |

0%   20%   40%   60%
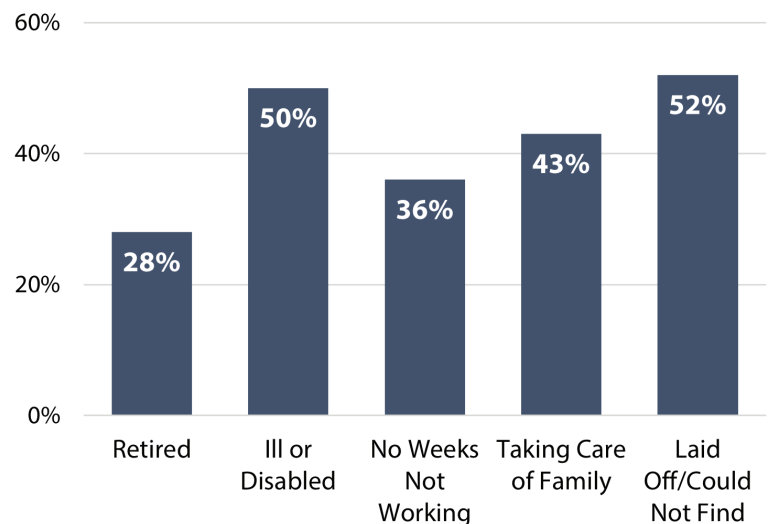
**Main Reasons for Not Working at Some Point in the Last 12 Months among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**

| | Retired | Ill or Disabled | No Weeks Not Working | Taking Care of Family | Laid Off/Could Not Find Work |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Households with Children | 8% | 21% | 32% | 18% | 14% |
| Households without Children | 10% | 43% | 19% | 7% | 14% |
| Senior Households | 51% | 28% | 12% | | 5% |

Legend: ■ Retired ■ Ill or Disabled ■ No Weeks Not Working ■ Taking Care of Family ■ Laid Off/Could Not Find Work
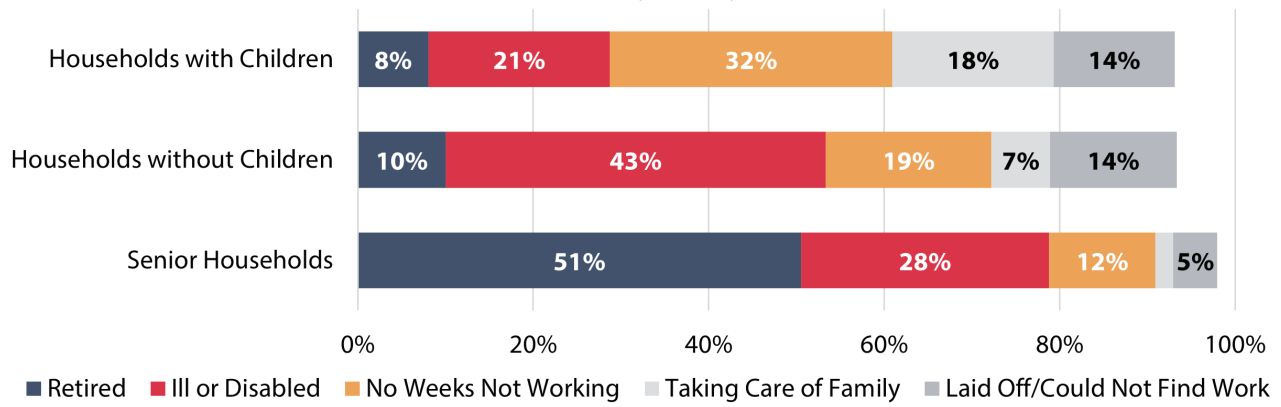
Food insecurity has a highly disparate impact on disabled individuals; a 2020 USDA analysis found that, as of 2018, 33.0% of households with a working-age member not in the labor force due to disability (regardless of their source of income) faced food insecurity, and households with a working-age member whose disability did not prevent them from working still had food insecurity rates of 24.8%; by comparison, the food insecurity rate in households with no working-age adults with disabilities was only 12.0%.

The USDA analysis notes that these disproportionate food insecurity rates exist even though SSDI and SSI are specifically intended to help individuals with disabilities meet their basic needs. Potential reasons for this disparity may include but are not limited to low benefit levels, the difficulty of applying for and being approved for disability benefits, low asset limits for SSI recipients preventing them from building a financial cushion in case of emergency, and the high costs many disabled individuals face due to their medical needs.

Even among households who stated that they work full time, low wages and irregular hours had a major impact on earnings. Over half of households (51%) who reported working full time earn less than $2,000 a month, which equates to $24,000 a year.

Among the households who work full-time and reported no weeks not working in the last year, 42% earn less than $24,000 a year. $24,000 a year works out to $11.50 an hour, and for a household of three, falls below the federal poverty line. In fact, 43% of households who work full time earn less than the federal poverty level, and 66% earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line. This data strongly indicates that low wages and irregular hours, rather than unemployment, are the main barriers to food security among food pantry visitors.

**Main Source of Household Income among Pantry Visitors in Dauphin County**

| Source | Percent |
|---|---|
| Work Full-time | 32% |
| Social Security or Pension | 24% |
| Disability or SSI | 17% |
| None of these | 12% |
| Work Part-Time | 11% |
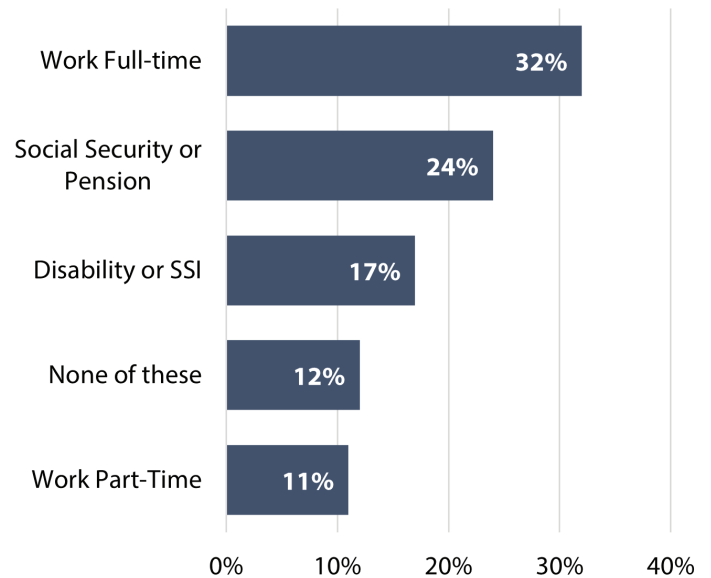
**Dauphin County Pantry Visitors that are Working Full Time by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level**

| | No Weeks Not Working | All Full-Time Workers |
|---|---|---|
| Below Poverty Level | 43% | 51% |
| 100% to 150% of the Poverty Level | 27% | 27% |
| 150% to 200% of the Poverty Level | 22% | 17% |
| Over 200% of the Poverty Level | 8% | 5% |

Legend: ■ No Weeks Not Working ■ All Full-Time Workers
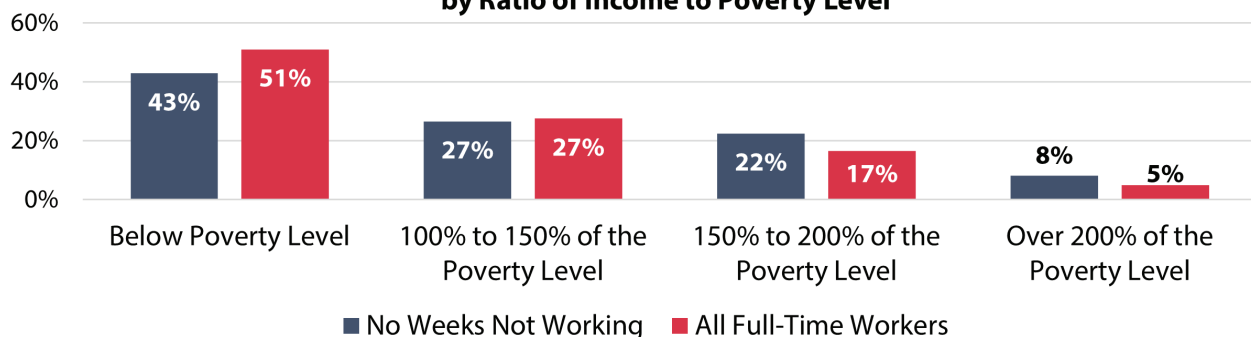
# HOUSING AND EVICTIONS

## *Economic Tradeoffs and Housing Instability*

Housing is integrally connected to food insecurity; as such, housing insecurity is one of the largest drivers of food insecurity among pantry visitors in Dauphin County. Fully two thirds (67%) of pantry visitors who reported experiencing a forced move in the last year said they experience very low food security, while a slightly smaller 63% of food pantry visitors who reported being worried about a forced move experienced very low food security. By comparison, just 31% of all food pantry visitors who did not report worries or experiences of forced moves experienced very low food security.

**Percent of Dauphin County Pantry Visitors Reporting Tradeoffs between Food and Utilities or Rent/Mortgage by Household Type**



**Very Low Food Security by Forced Move Status Among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors**
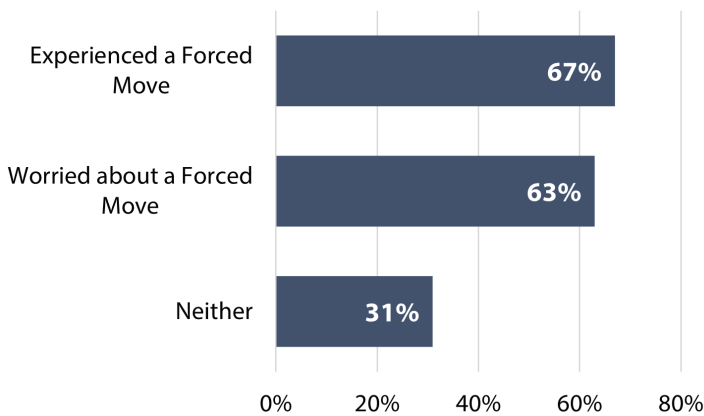


As mentioned earlier, housing costs, such as rent or mortgage and utilities, are the primary economic tradeoffs with food reported by pantry visitors in Dauphin County. Nearly two-thirds of pantry visitors (61%) report having to choose between buying food and paying for their rent/mortgage or utilities. More than twice as many neighbors reported making this tradeoff than reported making the next most common tradeoff, which was transportation at 31%.

At the household type level, these housing tradeoffs are most acute for households with children. Three quarters of households with children report choosing between food and either utilities or rent/mortgage, much higher than the reported tradeoffs for other household types. Seniors have by far the lowest reported economic tradeoffs at all levels. Households with children are 76% more likely than seniors to identify housing expenses as an economic tradeoff with food, while working-age households are 38% more likely than senior households to report these tradeoffs.

Based on the economic tradeoff data, households with children and working-age households without children are unsurprisingly also more likely to face worries about and experiences of forced moves. One in nine households with children (11%) has experienced a forced move in the last year, compared to one in ten (10%) of households without children, and just 3% of senior households. This disparity by household type is likely due in part to the wider availability of low-income housing specifically for seniors across Harrisburg and Dauphin County.

There are substantial differences in experiences of and worries about forced moves by pantry location as well. Worries about and experiences of forced moves are by far the highest in Harrisburg. Nearly a third (31%) of the city's pantry visitors said they worried about experiencing a forced move over the next year, while 14% reported experiencing a forced move in the last year. Experiences of forced moves in Harrisburg are the highest of any location where the CPFB has conducted hunger mapping studies; they are twice as high as Urban/Suburban Dauphin County (7% reported a forced move) and three and a half times as high as Rural Dauphin County (4% reported a forced move).

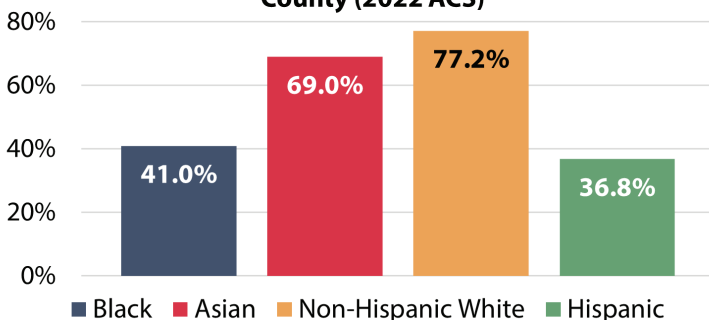**Forced Moves among Pantry Visitors by Dauphin County Region**
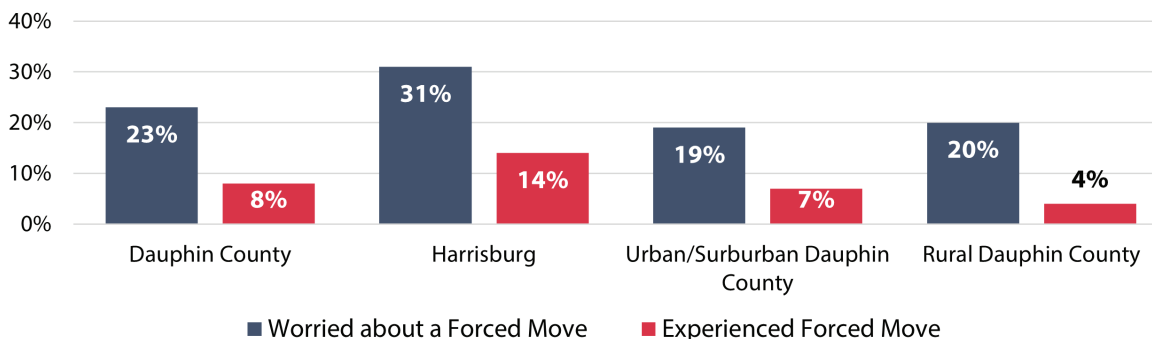
**Forced Moves among Dauphin County Pantry Visitors by Race/Ethnicity**



Black: 12% (Experienced Forced Move), 20% (Worried about a Forced Move)
Hispanic: 8% (Experienced Forced Move), 31% (Worried about a Forced Move)
White, non-Hispanic: 7% (Experienced Forced Move), 19% (Worried about a Forced Move)

■ Experienced Forced Move   ■ Worried about a Forced Move
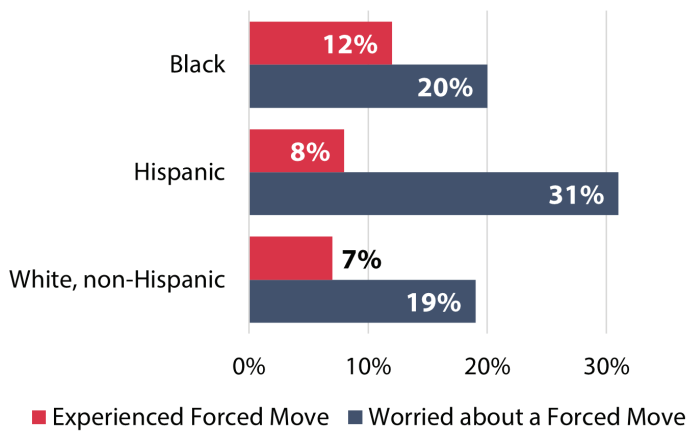
Disparities in housing security by race and ethnicity are also evident. Black households were 71% more likely to report experiencing a forced move in the last year than non-Hispanic white households, while Hispanic households had similar rates of experiencing a forced move than did non-Hispanic white households but were 63% more likely to be worried about experiencing one in the future. These differences can be explained in large part by the lower rates of homeownership among Black and Hispanic households rooted in historic redlining and systemic housing discrimination across Harrisburg and many other cities across the United States.

Indeed, Black and Hispanic households are much less likely than white, non-Hispanic and Asian households to own their own homes according to ACS estimates. Meanwhile, neighbor survey results show that renters are four times more likely than homeowners to experience a forced move among pantry visitors (8% vs. 2%) and slightly more likely to be worried about a forced move compared to homeowners (23% vs. 20%).

**Homeownership Rate by Race/Ethnicity, Dauphin County (2022 ACS)**



Black: 41.0%
Asian: 69.0%
Non-Hispanic White: 77.2%
Hispanic: 36.8%

■ Black   ■ Asian   ■ Non-Hispanic White   ■ Hispanic

### Redlining in Metropolitan Harrisburg

Notably, in the mid-1930s, Harrisburg was one of 239 American cities that were officially "redlined," or divided by the New Deal-era Home Owners' Loan Corporation into "risk zones" by neighborhood; the ostensible purpose was to define areas that were safer investments of federal housing money. In reality, the different zones were defined largely based on race, with integrated, ethnically diverse or primarily Black or Hispanic neighborhoods being rated as riskier than those inhabited mainly by non-Hispanic white individuals. Redlining thereby directed funds away from communities of color, as residents of redlined areas were not eligible for the same mortgage and insurance products as residents of higher-graded, primarily white areas and thereby lacked access to the credit needed to buy homes, start businesses, and build wealth.[49]

Even into the present day, high-poverty areas in and around Harrisburg, including much of Steelton, broadly align with areas assigned "industrial" or low "C" and "D" grades when redlined, and all of the public housing complexes in the city are in these areas.[50] The original redlining map of the city is shown below; yellow and red areas are those marked "Definitely Declining" or "C" and "Hazardous" or "D." Nationwide, most neighborhoods originally given a "D" grade are low-to-moderate income today, and many are majority communities of color, showing the long shadow redlining has cast on historically marginalized communities.[51]
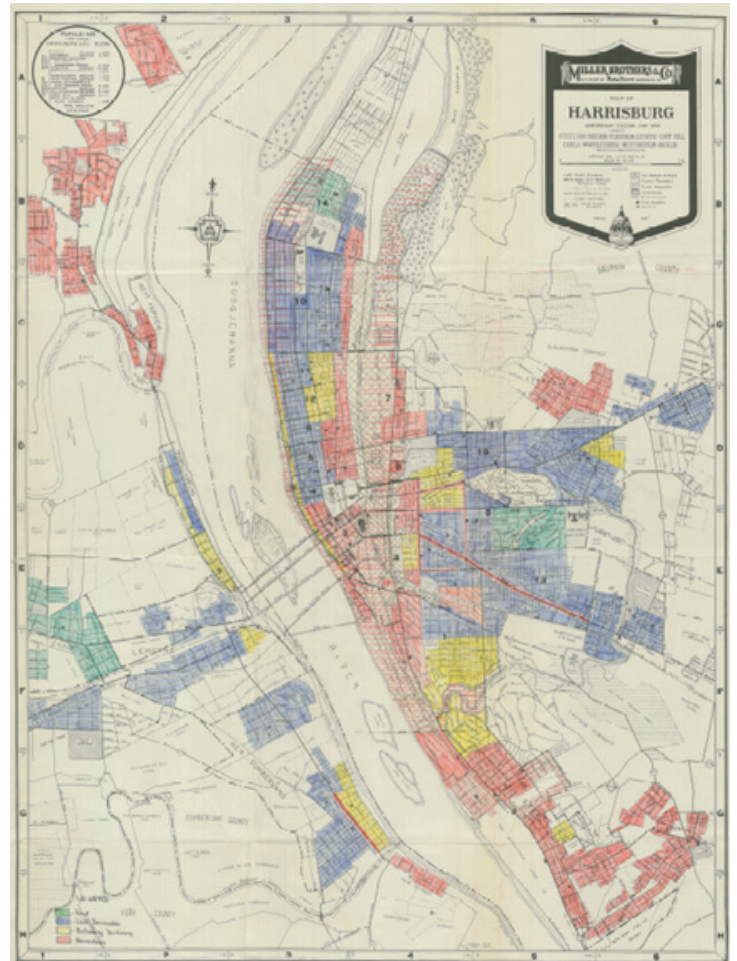
### Soup Kitchen and Pantry Utilization Among Homeless Neighbors in the City of Harrisburg

Housing status is closely associated with accessing food via a pantry or a soup kitchen.[52] Soup kitchens are a critical resource for the most marginalized of the food insecure, including those who are homeless.[53] In the absence of stable housing, individuals experiencing homelessness lack adequate resources to prepare and store healthy meals and may be more likely to visit soup kitchens rather than food pantries.[54]

Dauphin County has a population of 353 individuals classified as homeless according to the 2023 Point in Time Count.[55] People who reside in shelters or in encampments scattered on the edge of downtown Harrisburg lack food storage and cooking facilities, but human services representatives reported that many have utilized food pantries to meet at least some of their food needs. Harrisburg meal programs (generally referred to as soup kitchens) offer free meals to community members; in 2023 over 19,000 meals were served each month by four CPFB-partner soup kitchens. One of the largest providers is Downtown Daily Bread, which provides a noon meal on weekdays.

There is a robust network of formal service providers and informal grassroots organizations dedicated to providing food options for neighbors experiencing homelessness in Harrisburg. Neighbors interviewed at a noon meal described the general schedule of meals, whether for hot meals indoors, food in to-go containers distributed from the back of unmarked vehicles, or from an assortment of people who bring food to encampment areas on a regular basis. One respondent explained that if you want to know where to get food on a given day, you needed to simply "follow the backpacks." Notably, very few people could name the person or organization providing a meal, even with established programs or those operating for a long time.

Most respondents felt they could access enough food in Harrisburg and stated, "If you're hungry, that's on you." However, unhoused neighbors with food allergies or special diets related to medical conditions saw their options as much more limited. Another major concern for soup kitchen users was access to these meals, which required balancing conflicting demands on time, distances to travel, and concerns about conflict with other people or law enforcement while waiting for food. A few respondents noted skipping meals for this reason. To mitigate issues like this, several providers work to make food more accessible by bringing it to the homeless encampment, but these strategies introduce additional food safety risks.

Navigating food intake while homeless brings a sense of precarity. Homeless neighbors assumed significant risk when accepting food from strangers. One respondent described a situation when food distributed made many people sick, resulting in word on the street to "not accept food from Linda" anymore. Another respondent noted that there is a man who will pick folks up in his van, take them to an unknown location for a Bible study of sorts and feed them the best chicken around. The quality of the dinner outweighed the risks inherent to this arrangement, according to this respondent. A different neighbor enthusiastically described his "circuit" to find food, which included trash cans near the Capitol building.

Nearly every unhoused neighbor researchers spoke to said they were treated with dignity and respect at meal programs and expressed appreciation for the unpaid labor of community organizations and regular citizens who share food with the homeless community in Harrisburg. One neighbor said of Downtown Daily Bread, "Everyone's so nice here…makes me feel human," illustrating the importance of dignity and respect from service providers. Provider organizations that CPFB researchers spoke to could identify specific areas of need they address, especially to fill in gaps not met by traditional meal programs.

Neighbor surveys asked pantry visitors about their utilization of meal programs in their community; these responses were then compared to the type of housing situation reported by respondents. The sample size of people who stated that they are unsheltered and who were at a pantry to be surveyed was vanishingly small; however, adding categories of housing, such as shelter or motel and staying with someone else/doubled up, provides a picture of what the food insecurity status is of people who are *precariously housed*.
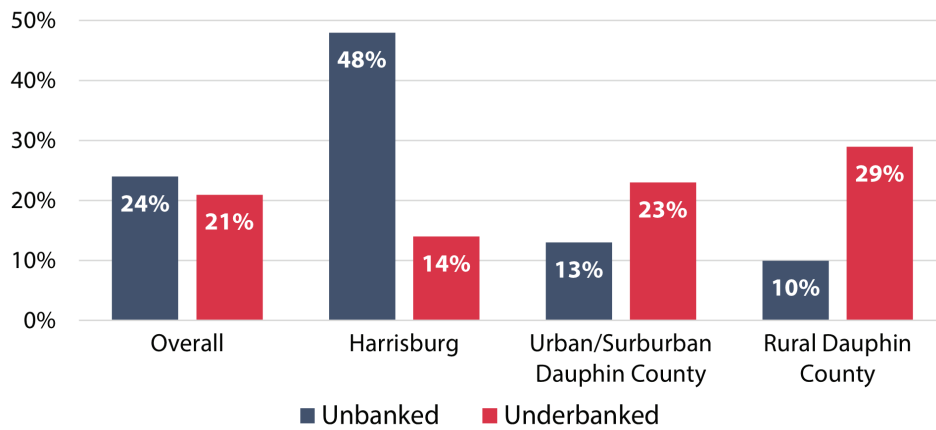
In Dauphin County, 41% of surveyed pantry visitors reported experiencing very low food security. Of the pantry visitors that could be further categorized as precariously housed, that percentage rose to 57%, with the largest group being households who are staying with someone else/doubled up. Additionally, the question of whether a survey respondent used a soup kitchen or community meals was the final question of the hunger mapping survey prior to asking if there were other comments to share. Several people noted that they did not visit soup kitchens or community meals because the meals located in the downtown Harrisburg area require walking or paid parking, the cost of which is prohibitive.

*"Everyone's so nice here… makes me feel human."*

*– Community Meal Visitor*

**Percent of Unbanked and Underbanked Pantry Visitors by Dauphin County Region**

| Region | Unbanked | Underbanked |
|---|---|---|
| Overall | 24% | 21% |
| Harrisburg | 48% | 14% |
| Urban/Surburban Dauphin County | 13% | 23% |
| Rural Dauphin County | 10% | 29% |

■ Unbanked　■ Underbanked

## FINANCIAL SYSTEM ACCESS

Access to mainstream financial services is severely limited among food pantry visitors in Harrisburg and somewhat limited in the rest of Dauphin County. In the city of Harrisburg, almost half (48%) of pantry visitors reported being unbanked, meaning they do not have access to mainstream financial services, including a checking or savings account. Unbanked rates in Harrisburg are twice those of the county (24%). Statewide, just 2.6% of Pennsylvanians are unbanked, so pantry visitors in Dauphin County are ten times more likely than Pennsylvanians on average not to have a checking or savings account, and those in Harrisburg are astoundingly twenty times more likely than other Pennsylvanians to lack bank access.

An additional 21% of pantry visitors are classified as underbanked, meaning they have a checking or savings account but also use alternative financial services, such as check-cashing and payday loans. Dauphin County's underbanked rate among pantry visitors is one and a half times the national average of 14%.

Harrisburg pantry visitors are less likely to be underbanked than are Urban/Suburban and Rural Dauphin County pantry visitors, but this is largely an effect of the extremely large proportion of unbanked individuals in the Harrisburg pantry visitor population. Nearly two thirds (62%) of pantry visitors in Harrisburg are unbanked or underbanked; this is 36% and 39% of Urban/Suburban Dauphin County and Rural Dauphin County food pantry visitors, respectively.

High rates of no or limited financial access among pantry visitors is a major concern because mainstream financial system access helps connect people to economic mobility opportunities and is linked with greater financial well-being at both the individual and community level.[56] Without access to traditional banking, households are often forced to rely on costly alternative financial services, such as check-cashing and payday loans. These services can take up a significant portion of low-income individuals' take-home pay, as unbanked households spend on average 5% of their income on fees for alternative financial services.[57]

Financial health has a major impact on food insecurity across a variety of dimensions due to its impact on economic security. People without credit scores have difficulty obtaining or applying for a loan, renting an apartment, or qualifying for other financial tools.[58] A food security assessment conducted in Alameda County, California found that the prevalence of subprime credit scores was strongly related to food insecurity at the ZIP Code level.[59] People with subprime credit and without access to mainstream financial markets pay more for goods and services than other households, making it more expensive to be poor.[60]

Nationally, unbanked and underbanked rates vary considerably by income, although access to mainstream financial services has increased over time for people of all income groups. This data aligns with findings among Dauphin County food pantry visitors, as 37% of pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty level were found to be unbanked compared to 19% of visitors with incomes above the poverty line.

Nationwide, there are significant differences in financial access rates by race and ethnicity. Black and Hispanic households are far more likely to be unbanked (rates between 9% and 11%) than are Asian and white households (rates between 2% and 3%).

**Banking Status by Race/Ethnicity among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors**

| Race/Ethnicity | Unbanked | Underbanked |
|---|---|---|
| White | 11% | 24% |
| Hispanic | 43% | 13% |
| Black | 26% | 25% |

■ Unbanked　■ Underbanked

**73**
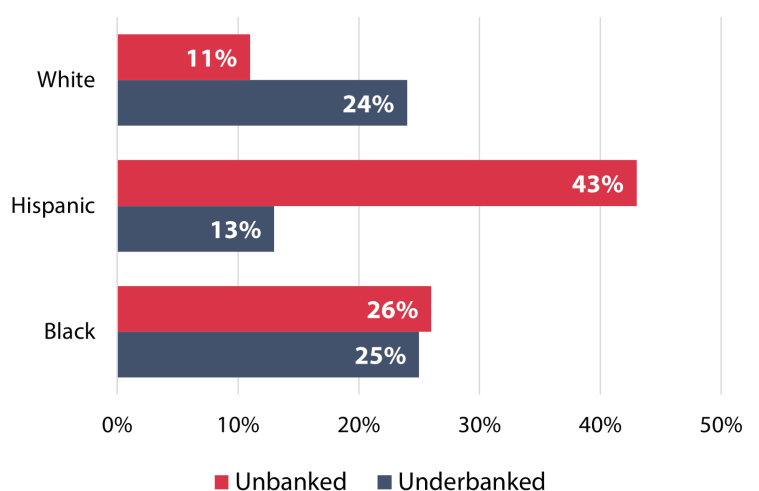
Furthermore, Black and Hispanic households are more likely to be unbanked than white households at every single level of income. These disparities by race/ethnicity are the result of historic marginalization, financial exclusion, and predatory inclusion in asset markets.[61,62]
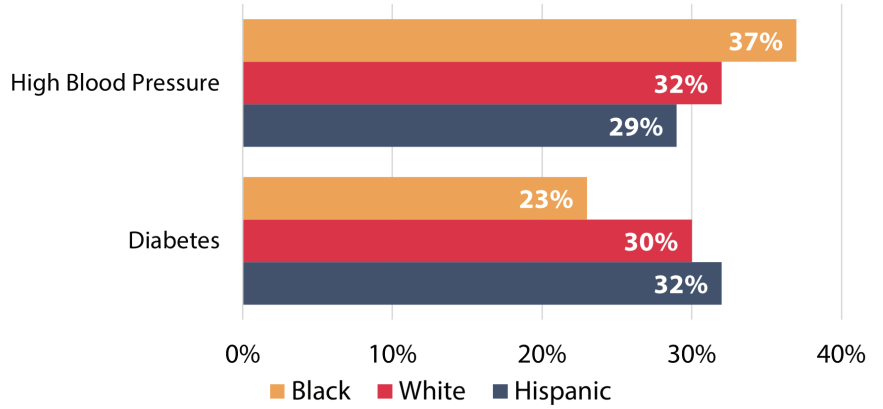
Among pantry visitors in Dauphin County, these patterns largely hold, although Hispanic food pantry visitors are the most likely to be unbanked, at 43%. Over a quarter of Black households are unbanked compared to just 11% of white, non-Hispanic households.

## HEALTH CONDITIONS

Chronic health conditions are another major intersecting issue with food insecurity. Households who face food insecurity are more likely to experience chronic health conditions for a variety of reasons, including having insufficient purchasing power to access a diet of sufficient quality and variety as well as chronic stress. These factors contribute to and are exacerbated by food insecurity.[63]

Half of all households among Dauphin County food pantry visitors have at least one individual that faces one or more chronic health conditions, including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and kidney disease. High blood pressure and diabetes are particularly prevalent, as nearly a third of all households have an individual dealing with either high blood pressure, diabetes, or both. Heart disease impacts another 10% of all households, while kidney disease impacts 4%.

**Chronic Health Condition Incidence among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors by Race/Ethnicity**

| | High Blood Pressure | Diabetes |
|---|---|---|
| Black | 37% | 23% |
| White | 32% | 30% |
| Hispanic | 29% | 32% |

Black ■ White ■ Hispanic

Chronic health conditions and other serious health concerns can have ripple effects throughout people's lives that make pantry services even more vital. One neighbor in Urban/Suburban Dauphin County told CPFB researchers that no one in their house is working because of a cancer diagnosis in the household. Another pantry visitor mentioned they have a child who is a traumatic brain injury survivor who is seriously disabled but has yet to be approved for disability benefits. These neighbors are just two examples among many who are turning to the charitable food system to get through extremely challenging situations related to health concerns.

Chronic health conditions vary significantly in their incidence by race and ethnicity. Black households are the most likely to have reported a household member with high blood pressure and Hispanic households are the most likely to have mentioned a member with diabetes. Non-Hispanic white households have middling, but still elevated rates of both chronic conditions.

**Chronic Health Condition Incidence among Dauphin County Food Pantry Visitors**

| | |
|---|---|
| High Blood Pressure | 32% |
| Diabetes | 30% |
| Heart Disease | 10% |
| Kidney Disease | 4% |
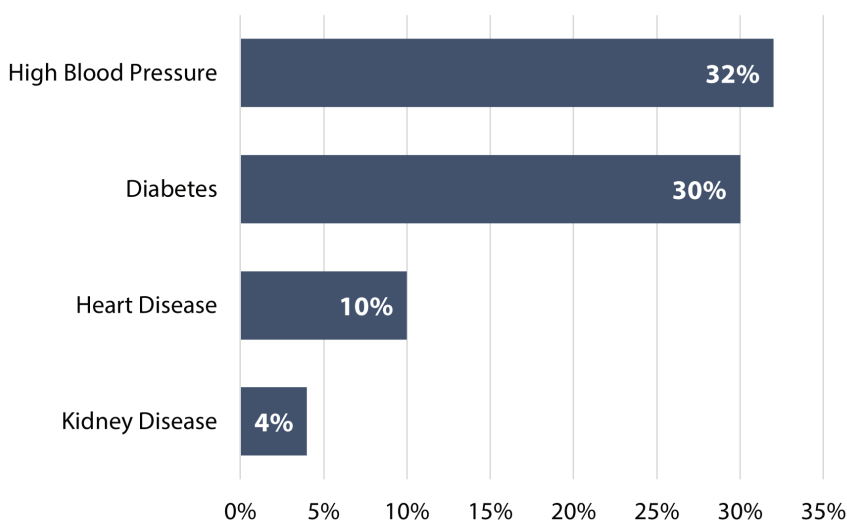
Looking at household type, working-age households without children are the most likely to face chronic health conditions, with rates near 40% for both high blood pressure and diabetes, followed by seniors who have rates around 35% for high blood pressure and diabetes. Households with children have the lowest rates of chronic health conditions – around 25% have a member with high blood pressure and/or diabetes.

The wide variety of issues connected to health show the importance of offering fresh, nutritious foods at pantries and of the strong potential for partnerships with healthcare providers that can help neighbors prevent and manage chronic health conditions.
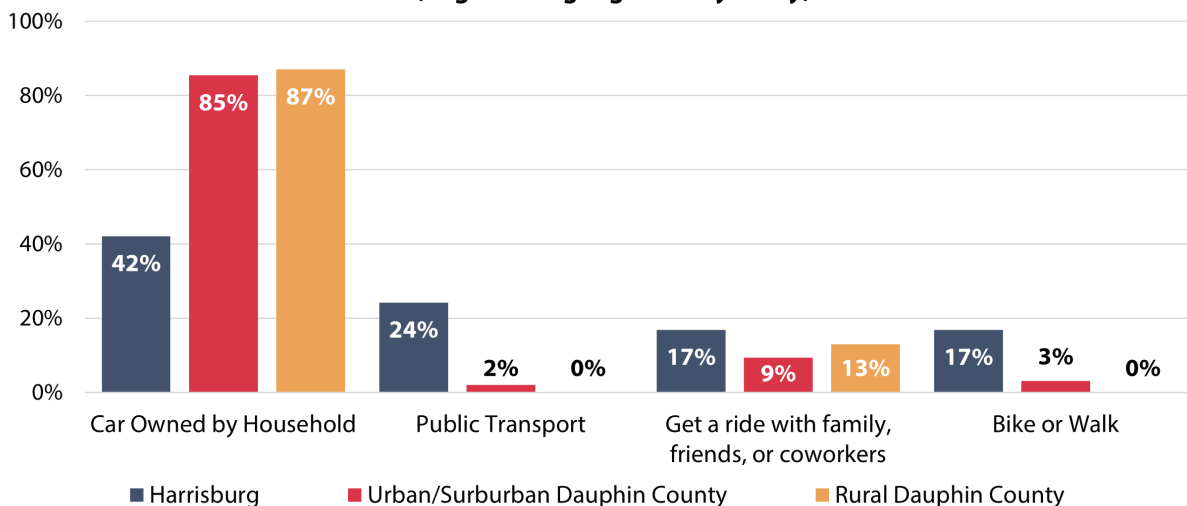
74

## VEHICLE ACCESS

As discussed elsewhere in this report, transportation is a significant barrier that may prevent food insecure households from accessing food pantry services, especially in Harrisburg. A lack of or limited access to transportation is a barrier to accessing a variety of necessities in life, including medical appointments and employment opportunities, which makes transportation an upstream issue as well as a pantry access concern.

According to the 2022 ACS, Harrisburg has the highest proportion of households without a vehicle of all major municipalities in central Pennsylvania at 24%; this rate is similar to those of much larger cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and is five times that of the rest of Dauphin County, where only 5% of households do not have access to a vehicle.

Among pantry visitors in particular, car ownership rates are likely significantly lower than those in the general population. Although neighbor surveys did not ask about car ownership directly, they did ask about the main form of transportation for each household. In Harrisburg, about two in five (42%) pantry visitors said that a vehicle they owned was their main form of transportation, while more than four of five pantry visitors in the rest of the county used a personal vehicle as their primary means of transportation.

It should be noted that this question was incorrectly translated in the Spanish version of the survey, which instead asked how each household usually gets to the pantry. Results of this question among Spanish-speaking neighbors suggest that they may have even less access to vehicles than do English-speaking neighbors, making the figures mentioned above overestimates.

**Main Reported Form of Transportation by Dauphin County Region**
**(English Language Surveys Only)**

| | Harrisburg | Urban/Surburban Dauphin County | Rural Dauphin County |
|---|---|---|---|
| Car Owned by Household | 42% | 85% | 87% |
| Public Transport | 24% | 2% | 0% |
| Get a ride with family, friends, or coworkers | 17% | 9% | 13% |
| Bike or Walk | 17% | 3% | 0% |

In survey comments, one neighbor noted that it is difficult to get to work because of transportation challenges. Households often rely on rides from family, friends, or coworkers, which is the second most common form of transportation among pantry visitors outside of Harrisburg and third most common for city residents, after public transportation.

Overall, policymakers should be aware of the major problems that transportation challenges create for food insecure neighbors in accessing food pantry services and other activities of daily life, such as employment opportunities. Policies and programs focused on increasing the utility of public transportation, employer-supported transportation arrangements, and other creative solutions to increase transportation access could help ease this burden on food insecure households across Harrisburg and Dauphin County.

### RETAIL FOOD ACCESS

Accessibility of retail food is another major food security concern that is directly affected by household vehicle and public transportation access. USDA has several food desert criteria for low-income census tracts; this analysis uses a combination of two of them. The first requires that more than 33% of the census tract's households live at least one mile (in urban areas) or ten miles (in rural areas) from the nearest supermarket, while the second requires that more than 100 households do not have access to a vehicle.

Although the USDA food desert definitions are useful measures, there are notable drawbacks to their methodology. The foremost of these is that the USDA definitions are area-based analyses with firm distance cutoffs, so they present a black and white dichotomy not necessarily reflective of real experiences.

The map below identifies the five census tracts in Dauphin County which meet the above criteria. All five census tracts are adjacent to each other and combine to form one large food desert centered on South Harrisburg and Steelton. Therefore, placing a grocery store in a central location within the identified food deserts has the possibility to eliminate all five at once. However, there are other potential solutions such as Grocery Hopper services, like those offered by RabbitTransit in certain areas, or a variety of other transportation assistance options to existing grocery stores.

Regardless of which solution is ultimately pursued, Steelton is clearly a high-priority area for increasing retail food access with a supply-side solution.

New research in the field of food access has shown that demand-side solutions, like increasing purchasing power and income can be effective interventions in food deserts, and may be more appropriate than are placing a new grocery store in a neighborhood in many cases.[64,65] Income-based solutions, like Double-Up Food Bucks (DUFB), a program that integrates with SNAP to match purchases of fresh produce dollar-for-dollar up to a certain limit, or other food voucher programs like farmers market nutrition programs, could improve access along with additional retail locations in food desert locations across Harrisburg City and its surrounding areas.[66]

## Harrisburg Food Deserts by Census Tract



USDA LILA 1 & 10 FD

Food Desert at 1 or 10 miles from SNAP Retailer

Non-Food Desert

Low Vehicle Access

SNAP Retailer
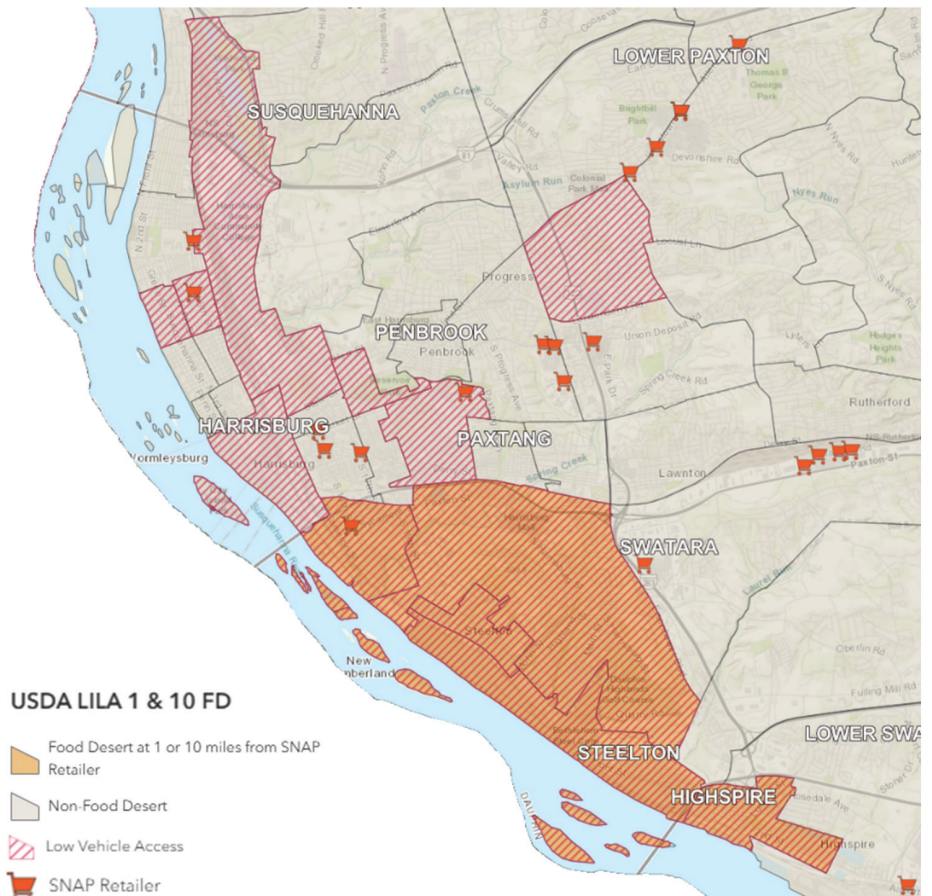
# Intersecting and Upstream Issues Recommendations

**Section 4 Finding 1:  Full-time work is the main income source for food pantry visitors in Dauphin County.** Most people who visit pantries who can work, do work. Survey results show that a total of 73% of pantry visitors are working full time, receiving Social Security or Pension, or receiving Disability or SSI. An additional 11% report working part-time. Unemployment makes only a minimal contribution towards the overall need for charitable food in Dauphin County.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders concerned about food security and anti-poverty work should highlight this data as it works to reduce stigma and preconceived notions about pantry visitors. Optional programs that help people find opportunities for consistent and improved employment situations are likely more useful than activities focused on employment status alone. Pantries should refer interested individuals to workforce development resources offered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Stakeholders should advocate against work requirements for SNAP and other safety net programs, as the primary barriers to work are disability status and taking care of family; work requirements would cause these households to fall through the cracks.

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**Section 4 Finding 2: Over half of full-time workers said that they earn wages below the federal poverty level.** A total of 51% of full-time workers, including 43% of full-time workers who worked every week in the last year, had incomes below the poverty level. For most workers and households, a poverty-level wage works out to less than $24,000 a year, or about $11.50 per hour.

Low wages and irregular work are major contributors to food insecurity. Pantry visitors often expressed that they struggle when their hours are inconsistent and/or their work is seasonal.

**Recommendation:** Low and minimum wage issues have a major impact on food pantry visitors, as do issues of irregular and inconsistent hours and seasonal work.

Food security stakeholders should advocate for family-sustaining wages at a government level, as well as with business partners and donors. Other advocacy points that could increase the security of 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.

Coalition members could facilitate engagement with pantry visitors and learn more about the most impactful issues to better inform advocacy efforts and program design.

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**Section 4 Finding 3: People on SSI or Disability are the most likely to have incomes below the poverty level, with 53% reporting incomes below 100% of the federal poverty line.** Social Security or Pension recipients are the least likely to have incomes below the poverty level (32%), while 43% of full-time workers have incomes below the poverty level.

Disability status is a major driver of food insecurity among pantry visitors in Dauphin County, both for households receiving Disability or SSI and for those who report disability as the primary barrier to work but are not receiving benefits.

**Recommendation:** Food security and anti-poverty stakeholders and advocates should back efforts to simplify the application process for and increase the sufficiency of disability benefits at the federal level, along with program reforms that would help Disability and SSI recipients live less precariously.

It is often an onerous process to be approved for disability benefits that may require multiple appeals and the assistance of a lawyer. Even among households who are eventually approved to receive benefits, payment amounts are low, and program requirements make it difficult to weather a crisis. SSI recipients must keep their assets, with scant exceptions for housing and transportation, below $2,000 or risk losing their benefits entirely, which keeps them from building a financial safety net.[67]

Actions stakeholders could take to make a difference for disabled neighbors include, but are not limited to supporting legislation that would streamline the benefit application process, increase benefit amounts, more easily allow work, and raise the SSI asset cap. Advocacy around expanding eligibility for and the flexibility of tax-exempt savings accounts for people with disabilities that do not count against the asset limits (ABLE accounts) could also help disabled neighbors.

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**Section 4 Finding 4: Access to mainstream financial services, like checking and savings accounts, is severely limited among pantry visitors, especially in Harrisburg.** In the city, nearly half (48%) of pantry visitors are unbanked, while 24% of pantry visitors in Dauphin County overall are unbanked. An additional 21% of food pantry visitors are underbanked, meaning they have access to a checking or savings account but that they also use alternative financial services, such as check-cashing and payday loans.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders should consider pantries well-targeted locations to increase access to financial services that work for people in a wide variety of circumstances, including bank accounts tailored to low-income households. "Bankable" moments, like tax time, are key opportunities to increase financial system access.

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. The charitable food system can work with local financial institutions and other nonprofits to connect unbanked populations to mainstream financial services.

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**Section 4 Finding 5: Housing and housing-related expenses like utilities are among the primary drivers of food insecurity among pantry visitors in Dauphin County.** Nearly two-thirds of pantry visitors (61%) reported choosing between food and either utilities or their rent/mortgage. Households with children are the most vulnerable, with the highest economic tradeoffs and housing.

High housing costs contribute to high rates of forced moves, especially in Harrisburg. A total of 14% of Harrisburg's food pantry visitors have experienced a forced move, nearly twice the county average of 8%. A third (31%) of pantry visitors in the city are concerned about a forced move in the coming year, while in Dauphin County as a whole, just under a quarter (23%) of pantry visitors have the same concern. Black households are 50% more likely than the county average to have experienced a forced move in the last year, while Hispanic households are 35% more likely to be worried about a forced move.

**Recommendation:** Food pantries should be cognizant of the housing issues many food insecure neighbors face. For example, they should ensure that foods tailored for unstably or marginally housed households are easily accessible. Additionally, maintaining and scaling utility assistance activities are vital supports that charitable food organizations can provide.

There is also a major need for eviction prevention strategies and resources, including mediation and targeted financial assistance, given the high rates of evictions in Harrisburg and Dauphin County.

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**Section 4 Finding 6: The charitable food network of formal providers and grassroots organizations appears to offer a generous amount of food to neighbors experiencing homelessness and is responsive to meeting related needs for their community.** However, homeless neighbors assume certain risks when relying on this type of food resource. Food safety, physical safety, and structuring one's day around the meal schedule are constraints on how homeless neighbors navigate this assistance. This experience is completely different from how a housed neighbor utilizes food assistance such as pantries, as food acquired at a pantry is intended for later preparation and consumption at home.

**Recommendation:** In the absence of affordable housing options to end homelessness, Harrisburg meal providers will always have neighbors relying on their services. The first step toward resolving food insecurity for this group requires ensuring low- or no-income individuals can access housing.

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**Section 4 Finding 7: Transportation is a significant barrier for food insecure households in Dauphin County to accessing necessities, including employment opportunities, and is an especially prominent barrier in Harrisburg.** Nearly a quarter (24%) of Harrisburg's households do not have a vehicle; this is almost five times the rate of the rest of Dauphin County (5%). Pantry visitors are even less likely to have access to a vehicle than the general population.

**Recommendation:** Access to public transportation, nearby employment opportunities, and affordable cars or other forms of transportation are critical to economic mobility, especially in the city of Harrisburg. Policymakers should work to expand access in each of these areas.

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**Section 4 Finding 8: Half of all food pantry visitor households have at least one individual that faces one or more chronic health conditions, as nearly half all households reported having at least one member with high blood pressure (32%), diabetes (30%), or both (45%).** Food insecure households are more likely to face chronic health conditions due to a variety of factors, including less purchasing power to build a diet of sufficient quality and variety and chronic stress. These factors are often exacerbated by and contribute to food insecurity, contributing to a vicious cycle among those they affect.

**Recommendation:** The charitable food system should continue to strengthen its partnerships with health providers across Dauphin County, as food insecurity and health have intersecting and additive impacts. This data provides evidence that the charitable food system has a major role to play in working to address underlying and chronic health conditions.

There are opportunities to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health through Medicaid 1115 waivers that provide funding to address food insecurity and other issues that impact long-term health and health spending. Charitable food providers represent excellent locations for health outreach and partnerships for health providers to work to better manage and ultimately reduce incidence of chronic diseases.

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**Section 4 Finding 9: Dauphin County has five of the most severe food deserts within central Pennsylvania.** These five food desert neighborhoods, which collectively house over 14,000 residents, are adjacent to each other and concentrated within the municipalities of Harrisburg, Steelton, and Highspire. Severe food deserts are a combination of two USDA food desert measures and have more than 33% of the census tract's households living more than one mile in urban areas, or ten miles in rural areas from the nearest supermarket, as well as more than 100 households that do not have access to a vehicle.

**Recommendation:** Stakeholders should focus on ways to increase access to affordable retail grocery providers for residents of southern Harrisburg and Steelton. Targeted transportation services, like Rabbit Transit's Grocery Hopper or Stop Hopper services, could go a long way to closing food access gaps. Placing a grocery store in a central location within the identified food deserts has the possibility to eliminate five severe food deserts at once; a store opening in Steelton or southwestern Swatara Township would therefore create the largest food access impact of any single supermarket location in all of central Pennsylvania.

Food security stakeholders should also focus on demand-side solutions like Double-Up Food Bucks and produce voucher programs at grocery stores that provide a match for every dollar spent on fruits and vegetables with SNAP benefits. These programs have proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption while increasing choice and can assist neighbors inside and outside of food deserts.

## CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This Community Hunger Mapping report is the conclusion of an eighteen-month intensive project that sought to improve understanding of the Dauphin County charitable food network and neighbor experience within it through a robust mixed-methods report, including analyzing publicly available data, incorporating external research, engaging with pantry managers and other system stakeholders, and most importantly, listening to and learning from the neighbors who visit food pantries.

The effort put into this report always centered the neighbors who visit Dauphin County's food pantries, with emphasis on accurately and compassionately depicting the reality of their lives and the often difficult circumstances they face. The report also focuses on creating an informative, actionable resource that can be used to make the charitable food system more equitable and responsive to neighbor needs while it strives to end hunger within the county. The analysis throughout the report contains several novel primary data collection efforts and analyses, including the results of observational visits to each pantry in the county and findings from interviews at soup kitchens with neighbors experiencing homelessness, that help it reach these two goals.

Though this document is the culmination of a lengthy Community Hunger Mapping Report process, it by no means signifies that the work has concluded. In fact, the work has just begun. To take the research and insights contained here off the page and into the world where it can make a concrete impact, dedicated implementation of its recommendations and evaluation of progress must be conducted. Only through application can there be a hope of research creating real change for Dauphin County's food insecure residents.

This project was undertaken in collaboration with key community leaders, including Dauphin County Commissioners and Dauphin County Human Services, as well as representatives from local health systems, food pantries, and other anti-poverty and social service agencies. Extending the collaborative spirit with which this report was written into the future through the creation of a Dauphin County Food Policy Council; including these stakeholders and many more will be a critical aspect of effective implementation. Only together will we be able to intentionally carry out the recommendations in this report, sustainably assess their effects, and make meaningful progress toward a Dauphin County where no one must worry about where their next meal will come from.

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