



## Policy Blog: Transportation among Central Pennsylvanian Food Pantry Visitors

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Access to transportation is an important upstream and intersecting issue with food insecurity and poverty, as a lack of timely, convenient means of transport such as a personal vehicle or a robust public transit network can be a major barrier not only to food access, but also to employment, education, child care, health care, and social services. According to [the University of Michigan's Transportation Insecurity Project](#), one in five American adults can be classified as experiencing "transportation insecurity," or "the inability to regularly move from place to place in a safe or timely manner because of a lack of resources needed for transportation." Research has found that [transportation insecurity is highly correlated with food and housing insecurity as well as other material hardships](#).

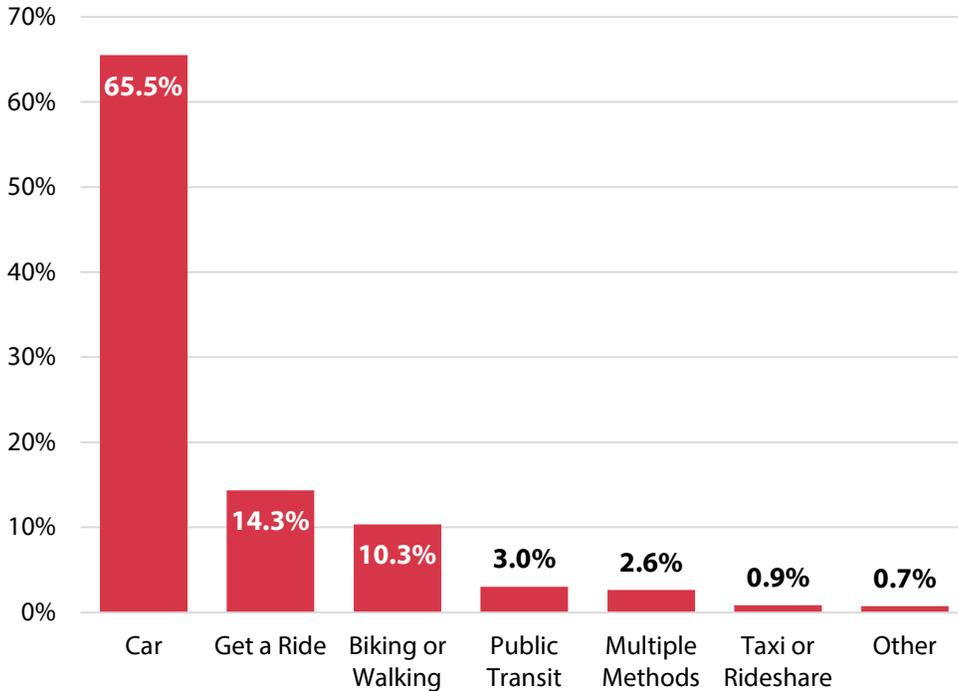
Individuals in poverty and members of historically marginalized groups are disproportionately likely to face transportation challenges, making transportation a key issue for the charitable food system to be aware of. In this month's policy blog, CPF's Impact and Policy Research (IPR) considers transportation access among central Pennsylvanian food pantry visitors as measured by responses to neighbor surveys and as compared to transportation data from the 2023 5-Year ACS. On the whole, the data suggests that food pantry visitors are more likely than other central Pennsylvanians to rely on means of transportation that are not a personal vehicle, and that therefore they are potentially at additional risk of experiencing barriers to food access and access to other resources and opportunities.

### *Methods*

As part of its ongoing Community Hunger Mapping research initiative, IPR conducts surveys with food pantry visitors that ask a number of questions about our neighbors' pantry experiences, personal circumstances, and demographics, including about their usual means of transportation. To date, more than 3,700 surveys have been completed at 73 agencies across sixteen counties within CPF's service territory since the project began in fall 2022. The sixteen counties represented are Adams, Bradford, Centre, Clinton, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lancaster, Lebanon, Lycoming, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, and Union. In total, these counties make up more than two thirds (68.7%) of the total population of CPF's service territory, and they are geographically diverse, so the survey results can be considered to be generally representative of food pantry visitors in Central Pennsylvania as a whole.

It is important to note that the way survey questions about transportation have been framed has changed as Community Hunger Mapping has evolved and improved; in early projects, neighbors were asked about how they arrived at the food pantry on the day they were surveyed, while in more recent ones, neighbors were asked about their primary means of transportation. For the purposes of this blog post, all transportation-related responses have been combined into simplified categories, as it is reasonable to assume that most neighbors usually arrive at food pantries via their primary means of transport.

### Means of Transportation Among Central Pennsylvania Food Pantry Visitors (Feeding America Client Survey)

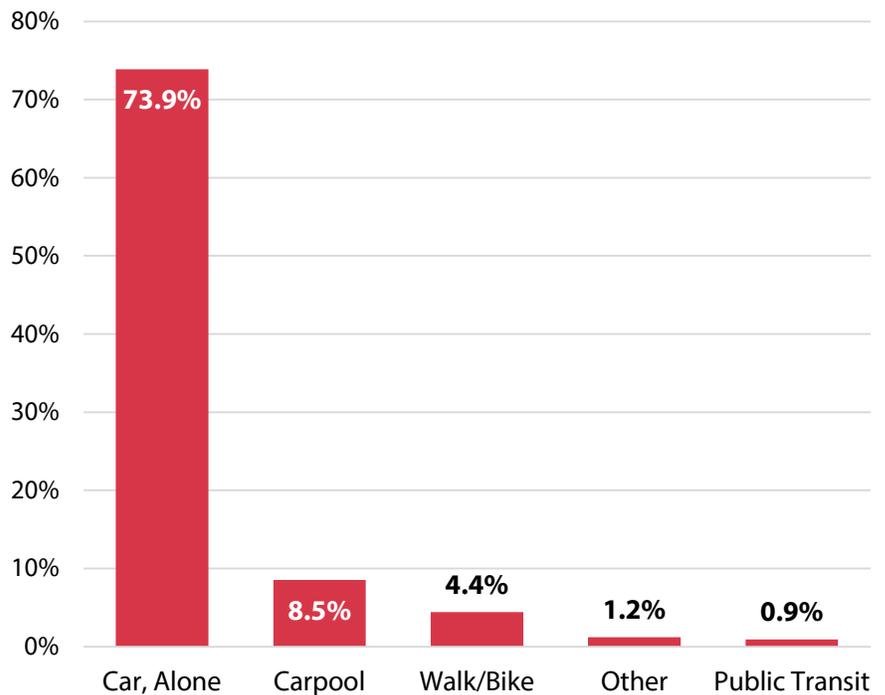


#### Findings

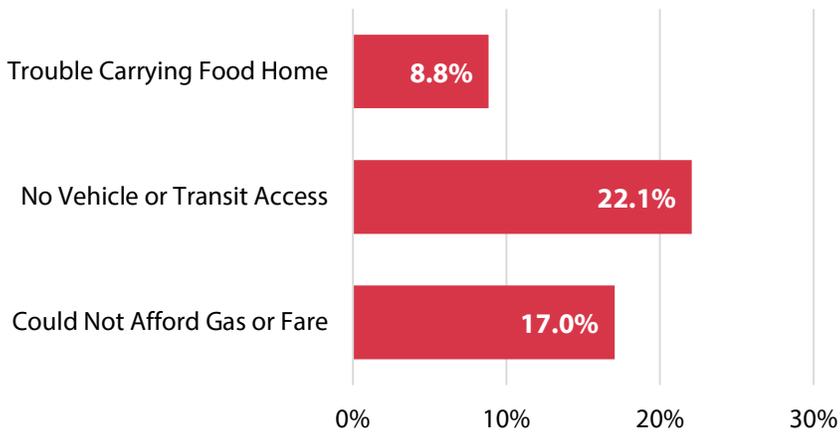
**Overall, almost two thirds of survey respondents (65.5%) across central Pennsylvania mentioned a personal vehicle owned by someone in the household when asked about transportation.** Another sixth (14.3%) said they rely on getting rides from family, friends, and neighbors, while one in ten (10.3%) bike or walk in order to get where they need to go. Smaller proportions of food pantry visitors mentioned public transit (3.0%), multi-modal transportation including combinations of walking, transit, and other means (2.6%), and taxi or rideshare (0.9%) as their main methods of travel.

Directly comparable data about the general population’s transportation methods is not available, but data about how employed individuals usually get to work is available via the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS); as of the 2023 5-Year ACS, three quarters of workers (73.9%) in central Pennsylvania counties for which Community Hunger Mapping had been completed drove alone to work, while fewer than one in ten (8.5%) carpooled and just one in twenty (4.4%) walked or biked. Fewer than one in a hundred (0.9%) took public transportation. These results suggest that food pantry visitors are more likely than others throughout central Pennsylvania to rely on means of transportation that is *not* a personal vehicle, which can introduce substantial complications or delays into trips to the pantry, grocery store, or other locations.

### Usual Means of Getting to Work for Workers Aged 16+, Central Pennsylvania (2023 5-Year ACS)



### Reported Transportation-Related Challenges to Pantry Access Among Central Pennsylvania Food Pantry Visitors (Feeding America Client Survey)



Other questions included in neighbor surveys reveal that, even for neighbors with vehicle or public transit access, transportation-related challenges remain. When asked if they had ever had trouble visiting a food pantry, one in six neighbors (17.0%) said they had been unable to visit because they could not afford gas or bus fare, and another one in five said they lacked a vehicle or transit access entirely (22.1%). One in eleven (8.8%) mentioned having trouble physically carrying their food home. Almost a third of food pantry visitors (29.1%) said that they had had to choose between transportation costs and groceries within the last year.

Taken together, these findings show that a sizable minority of the food pantry visitor population across central Pennsylvania experiences transportation barriers, and that these issues may also affect individuals who have a personal vehicle. The charitable food network should therefore be aware of the transportation challenges many face and should take steps to ensure that those with transportation challenges have equitable access to pantry services. Solutions could include, but are not limited to, the use of proxy services, home delivery, aligning distribution hours with bus schedules or otherwise collaborating with local transit authorities where applicable, offering transportation assistance, and more.