

CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA FOOD BANK

No one should be hungry

Centre County Community Hunger Mapping Final Report

Identifying Localized Food Access Gaps and Increasing Understanding of Intersecting Issues for the Charitable Food System

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centralpafoodbank.org

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Introduction

In 2024, one in eight residents of Centre County was unsure where or how they would get their next meal.



Nearly 20,000 people, including more than 3,500 children, experienced food insecurity at some point during the year. The heavy weight of food insecurity is not evenly distributed across the county; though it burdens residents of every community in Centre County, including members of the university community centered in State College, the degree to which it does so varies substantially by demography, geography, and an array of other contributing factors.

This Community Hunger Mapping report seeks to understand the dispersion, experiences and root causes of food insecurity within and across Centre County. Community-engaged methods were used throughout the research process so that food insecurity and the charitable food system's response to it could be accurately and compassionately described in this document.

The perspectives of neighbors facing food insecurity as expressed through surveys conducted at food pantries across the county are emphasized.

Listening sessions and agency surveys enabled the inclusion of the views of charitable food providers across the county as well. Central Pennsylvania Food Bank (CPFB) researchers visited several pantries in the county that did not host neighbor surveys in order to collect additional observational data and ensure that the charitable food network could be depicted holistically.

Quantitative analysis of secondary data from both public and private sources, such as the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and CPFB's own internal records, is included throughout to contextualize the qualitative and primary data.

This mixed-methods process allows the final product to provide a comprehensive view of the Centre County charitable food landscape. However, this project aims to go beyond increasing understanding of food insecurity in Centre County, though that is in itself a useful goal.

Rather, it seeks to guide lasting and meaningful improvements in the experiences of food insecure neighbors while simultaneously making progress toward ending hunger in the future. Therefore, this document contains a number of specific, detailed, and actionable recommendations that, if implemented collaboratively by food pantries, social service organizations, health systems, and other stakeholders throughout and beyond Centre County, can help us together build a county where no one goes hungry.

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



What is the extent of food insecurity in Centre County, and where in the county is it concentrated?



Who in Centre 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?



How accessible is charitable food throughout Centre County, and how does access vary in different areas of the county? How does access vary, if at all, by demographics?



What barriers do neighbors face in accessing charitable food services? Where do food distribution and access gaps exist in Centre County? What is the neighbor experience at food pantries like?



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?



What other issues impact food insecurity in Centre County? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?

Executive Summary

Working to End Hunger in Centre County

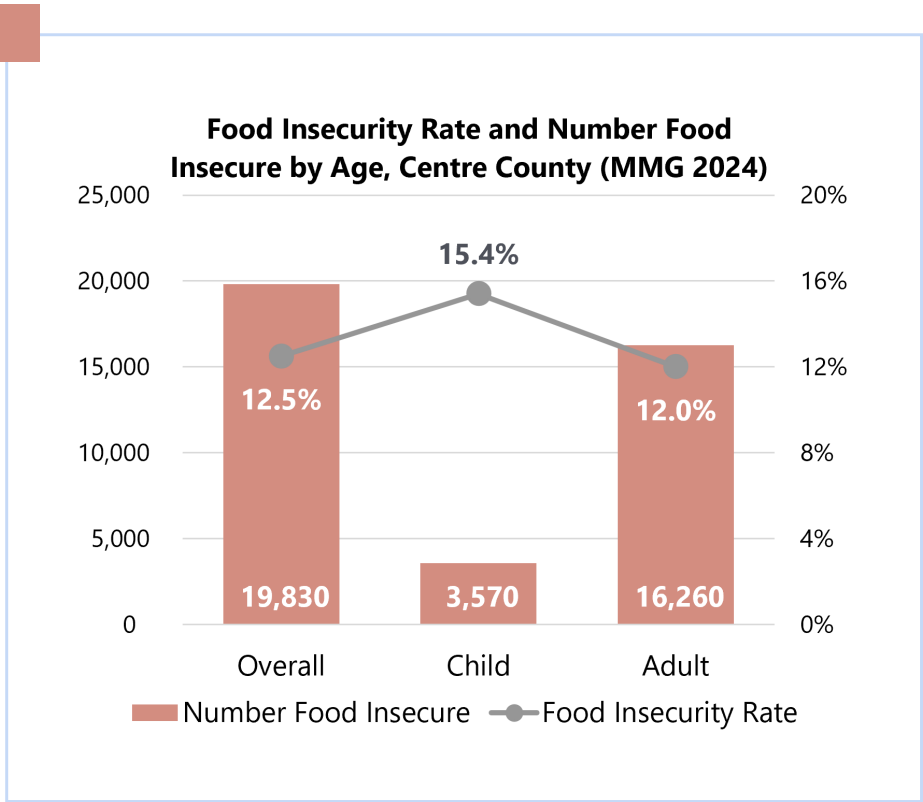
Food insecurity affects one in eight residents of Centre County (12.5%) as of 2024, the most recent year for which Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap estimates are available. In total, just under 20,000 people lacked consistent and reliable access to the food they needed to live an active, healthy life, including one in six children (15.4%). This means that more than 3,500 children were food insecure in the county in 2024.

The magnitude of food insecurity across not only Centre County, but also the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the United States as a whole, makes it one of the most pressing issues faced by many communities as well as the nation at large.

Food insecurity affects every neighborhood and community in Centre County, as demonstrated by census tract level food insecurity estimates for 2023. This data, which aligns well with municipal and neighborhood boundaries in Centre County, showed that food insecurity's prevalence at a subcounty level ranged from a low of 4.5% in central Ferguson Township to 20.2% in Patton Township.

Other areas with elevated food insecurity rates include the eastern portion of Ferguson Township, Bellefonte borough, and Philipsburg borough and adjacent parts of Rush Township.

It should be noted that because of the presence of Penn State University's main campus in State College and the large population of students in the area, Feeding America does not generate food insecurity estimates for many census tracts, which limits analysis in some ways.





This report attempts to overcome these data limitations by discussing the difference between the estimated countywide total food insecure population and the aggregate total of the food insecure population in tracts for which estimates are available.

Food insecurity is an increasing challenge in Centre County, as it is across the state and country. Food Insecurity has steadily increased across all age groups since 2021, when food insecurity hit a low point as a result of robust government support to vulnerable families as part of pandemic response, such as SNAP Emergency Allotments and the Expanded Child Tax Credit.

More than three in ten (31%) pantry visitors in Centre County reported experiencing very low food security.

Very low food security is the most severe form of food insecurity and is characterized by a regular reduction in the quantity of food consumed due to a lack of funds to buy more. Very low food security is the closest measure of hunger, so this finding means that almost a third of the county's pantry visitors often go hungry despite utilizing charitable food assistance.

Aligning with the overall county data, households with children are by far the most prone to experience severe food hardship, as more than two in five households with children (44%) screened positively for very low food security. On the other hand, one in four senior households (27%) reported facing very low food security. There was not sufficient data to assess very low food security rates for adult households without children.



The bulk of this report analyzes three distinct but interconnected approaches that stakeholders in the charitable food system and other community stakeholders invested in reducing food insecurity across the county can leverage as a means of alleviating hunger in Centre County. These three approaches to reduce very low food security are listed below; each is discussed in turn and in detail.

1 Approach 1: Strengthening and increasing the accessibility of the charitable food system

2 Approach 2: Encouraging robust participation in key government nutrition programs

3 Approach 3: Addressing upstream and intersecting issues that cause food insecurity

As an international student, I greatly appreciate the support of this pantry. It has given me the peace of mind of being able to obtain quality food and better manage my limited budget."

- Neighbor Survey Respondent (translated from Spanish).

Approach 1: Strengthening and Increasing Accessibility of the Charitable Food System

Centre County's charitable food network demonstrably reduces hunger across the county. Households who visit food pantries more often over the course of a year are less likely to experience very low food security than those with similar incomes who visit less frequently.

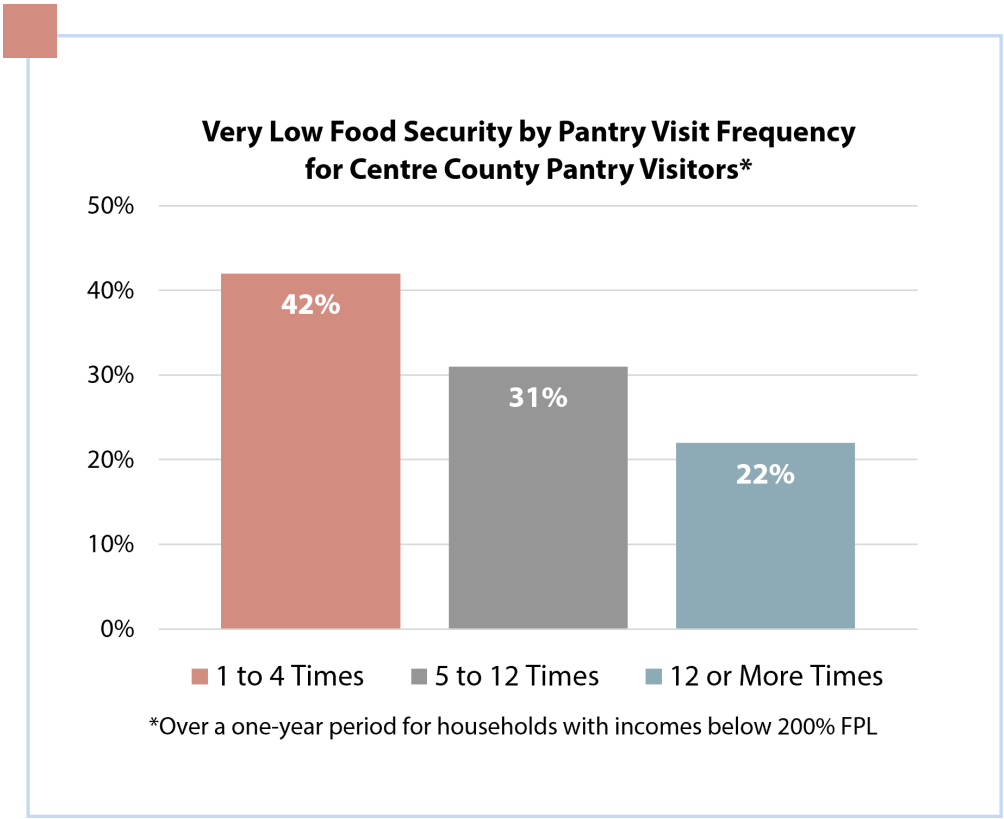
As shown in the chart at right, the positive effects of the Centre County charitable food system are largest for low-income households who can visit food pantries more than once per month on average.

Survey participants who visited food pantries more than once per month have a food insecurity rate that is 48% lower than those who visited quarterly or less; this means that additional visits can cut hunger in half.

Similarly, very low food security rates were 29% lower among households who visited more than once per month than among those who visited more than quarterly but less than monthly (5-12 times a year).

The Centre County charitable food network's impact on hunger is bolstered by several key strengths.

- *Geographic pantry access is strong, as fully 96% of food insecure residents of the county live in census tracts within 15 minutes of two or more pantries, which is excellent access compared to the fifteen other counties where CPFB has already completed Community Hunger Mapping projects.*



Furthermore, two thirds of survey participants reported receiving food they want "often or aways" when they visit food pantries, including many neighbors who stated that food pantries helped them eat healthier. While there is still room to improve, these robust food offerings are of particular importance given the high rate of chronic health conditions observed among pantry visitors in Centre County.

Lastly, very few neighbors reported experiencing judgment while utilizing a food pantry, at just 3% of all surveyed households.

OPPORTUNITIES TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

The significant and varied strengths of the charitable food system in Centre County form a solid foundation upon which to improve food access. There are four primary tactics that food pantries and other stakeholders can utilize to further maxmize the charitable food network's positive impact on county residents. Each is addressed in turn below.

APPROACH 1.1: SIMPLIFY INTAKE PROCESSES AND REQUIREMENTS TO LOWER ACCESS BARRIERS.

Many pantries across Centre County have intake policies that reduce food access and are not compliant with USDA or Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture regulations for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). For instance, several pantries require the provision of proof of income, copies of leases/rental agreements, or referrals from other agencies as a precondition to service.

At one pantry, researchers observed a neighbor being required to verify their monthly income by calling their bank prior to receiving food. A completed self-declaration of need form is the sole piece of documentation necessary to receive food at TEFAP or SFPP-participant agencies according to Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture guidance. Additional proof of what is self-declared on the form may never be required.

While pantries may ask other questions in order to improve their services or help connect neighbors to other resources, these should be clearly optional and may not be required to receive food.

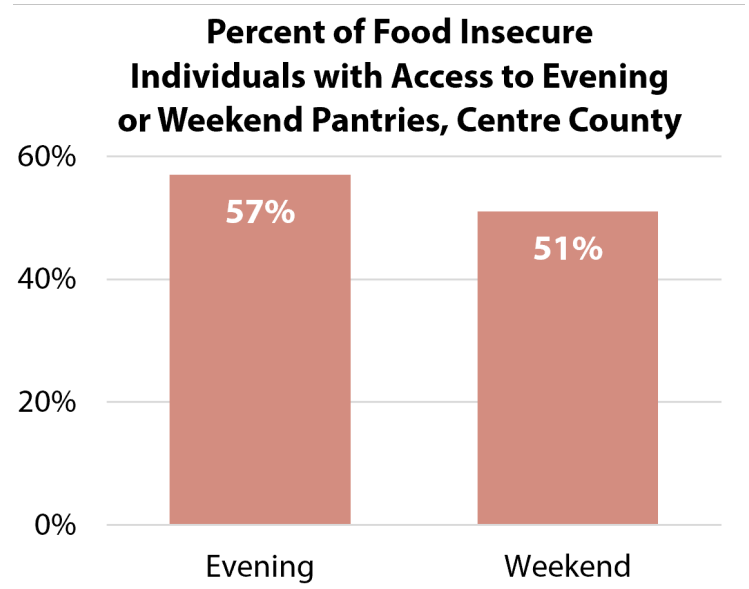
Most pantry visitors stated that they had positive interactions with the charitable food system in Centre County. This is excellent and means that charitable food providers in Centre County already strive to treat every neighbor they serve with respect.

Simplifying intake will further improve pantry experiences by ensuring that the charitable food system can reach everyone who needs help, without deterring anyone because of onerous administrative burdens.

APPROACH 1.2: INCREASE OFF-HOURS ACCESS, INCLUDING EVENING AND WEEKEND DISTRIBUTIONS.

Only about half of Centre County's food insecure individuals who reside in census tracts for which specific estimates are available can reach a weekend or evening food distribution within a 15-minute drive time.

Off-hours distributions are crucial because households with children are the most likely to have reported experiencing very low food security, with rates of 44% compared to 31% among all pantry visitors.



Households with children were also the most likely to report working full time, which often means that these households are unable to visit daytime pantries.

One in five households with children (19%) reported trouble accessing pantries due to their hours, compared to one in fourteen total pantry visitors (7%). It is important to note that this one in five proportion was found among households who were surveyed at a pantry; this therefore means that those with the largest barriers to pantry access were not represented at all.



APPROACH 1.3: WORK TO REDUCE WAIT TIMES AMONG PANTRY VISITORS RECEIVING FOOD.

Two in five households reported waiting more than an hour to get food from their local pantry. This is the highest rate observed among the counties for which Community Hunger Mapping projects have been completed to date. One contributing factor to these long waits may be the high prevalence of drive-through pantries in the county. Only three in ten (28%) of pantry visitors in Centre County who went to a choice pantry waited longer than an hour, compared to almost half (46%) of pantry visitors who were surveyed at a drive-though pantry. The frequency of pantry opening times may play a role as well, as many pantries in Centre County are open only once or twice a month.

Reducing wait times is a challenging goal for pantries, as wait times result from a complex intersection of several elements as well as each neighbor's own independent decisionmaking. Contributing factors include pantry-level issues like traffic control, distribution frequency, food availability over the course of the distribution, staff and volunteer capacity, and available waiting facilities (or lack thereof) as well as exogenous ones like weather, visitor travel time and distance, and visitor ability and willingness to wait.

The fact that not all aspects that contribute to wait times are within the control of the pantry increases the challenge of addressing them, but it also creates opportunity for pantries and the charitable food system to experiment with a variety of solutions and leverage collective knowledge to make future improvements.

APPROACH 1.4: INCREASE PUBLIC INVESTMENTS IN CENTRE COUNTY CHARITABLE FOOD PROVIDERS TO ENSURE ADEQUACY OF SERVICE.

Federal funding for charitable food providers has dropped by more than 50% in recent years; simultaneously, direct governmental supports for households in programs like SNAP and the expanded child tax credit have decreased as well. This reduced investment in food assistance programs in combination with significant cost inflation has led to higher food insecurity rates and record numbers of visits to food pantries, despite fewer available resources.

In Centre County, SNAP participation dropped 11.3% between January 2025 and May 2026, while federal food availability to the charitable food system fell by half. While the Commonwealth has increased charitable food funding within the last year, this only helped make up for about a quarter of the loss in federal support. Collective advocacy for additional support from all levels of government will be critical to ensuring that Centre County food pantries have enough resources to serve everyone who comes to their doors in search of help moving forward.

Approach 2: Encouraging Robust Participation in Key Government Nutrition Programs

Federal nutrition programs, including SNAP, WIC, school meal programs, and summer meal programs, all play key roles in supporting food insecure Americans. Centre County has abundant federal summer meal offerings compared to most other counties in which CPFB has completed Community Hunger Mapping projects. While opportunities to increase access remain, most notably in Port Matilda, this is a key strength.

Moreover, Centre County has school breakfast and lunch participation rates that are higher than the statewide averages.

One strength of Centre County is the fact that more than three quarters of county schools (75.6%) offer an alternative breakfast model.

Given these strengths, the primary opportunity to increase breakfast participation even further is to increase implementation of the "breakfast in the classroom" service model – just one in eight Centre County schools (12%) offers this model, and utilization of this model is associated with the highest participation rates in Centre County and beyond.

In light of Centre County's successes in child nutrition, the primary opportunities to ensure that more Centre County residents receive all supports for which they are eligible are through outreach for SNAP and WIC, which are respectively the largest and third-largest federal nutrition assistance programs in the nation.

APPROACH 2.1: COMMUNITY-BASED SNAP OUTREACH TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION

Working to increase SNAP participation in Centre County is the most considerable opportunity to meaningfully reduce food insecurity in the county. SNAP outreach and application assistance is essential in the context of the increased administrative burdens and benefit cuts enacted by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) in July 2025, which drove an 11.3% drop in Centre County SNAP participation over the last year.

SNAP is the largest and most effective nutrition assistance program in the nation and will remain so despite these cuts. CPFB SNAP outreach in Spring 2026 may have helped stem the tide of falling participation in Centre County, as a small rebound occurred in this time frame; these efforts should continue and grow.

Centre County ranks 56th of the 67 counties of Pennsylvania in family SNAP participation, which is a key measure that excludes college students not living with relatives. Some SNAP outreach methods that can reach Centre County residents include targeted efforts in high-priority areas identified via geographic gap analysis and community location-based outreach at programs where many visitors may be eligible for but not receiving SNAP, independent of their area of residence. Priority areas in Centre County include ZIP Code 16803 in State College as well as ZIP Code 16841 in the Howard area.

All pantries, regardless of location, are potentially effective locations for SNAP outreach, as only 46% of pantry visitors participate in SNAP.

There are major opportunities to boost uptake among pantry visitors with children, as a minimum of seven in ten (69%) survey respondents with children are likely income-eligible for SNAP, but only half (52%) participate.



APPROACH 2.2: WIC OUTREACH IN HIGH-PRIORITY AREAS

Similar to SNAP, Centre County has one of the lowest WIC participation rates in the state, ranked 55th of 67 counties. There are four ZIP Codes, all of which lie in the northern part of the county, in which child WIC participation gaps are sizable and where targeted program outreach may be effective.

These ZIPs include include 16823 in Bellefonte, 16841 in Howard, 16866 in Philipsburg, and 16872 in Rebersburg. As with SNAP, pantry visitor participation in WIC is low; only half (50%) of likely-eligible household reported participation.

Because WIC is effectively targeted towards one of the household types most at risk for food insecurity – low income households with small children – working to increase WIC uptake should be a priority for stakeholders across the county.

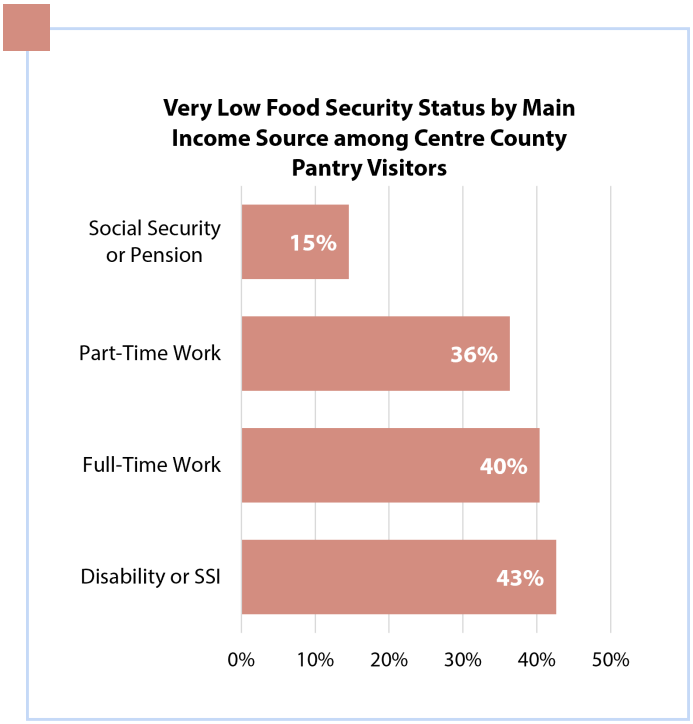
Approach 3: Addressing Upstream and Intersecting Issues that Cause Food Insecurity

Food insecurity does not occur alone; rather, it is the result of a variety of upstream and intersecting issues. Among food pantry visitors in Centre County, these factors include low incomes, chronic health conditions, transportation, and housing. Food pantry visitor households with children were especially likely to earn low wages as well as face transportation and housing challenges.

Poverty is one of the strongest determinants of very low food security, as more than two in five (44%) pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty line reported facing very low food security, compared to a third (33%) for households with incomes between one and one a half times the federal poverty line and one in six (17%) households between one and a half and two times the federal poverty line.
Households with children were the most likely to live in poverty; two in five (40%) fell below the federal poverty line, while the same was true of one in five senior-only households (21%) and one in three overall pantry visitors (29%). Accordingly, households with children are among the most vulnerable to very low food security, even among those who work full time.

Households with children were the most likely to mention full-time work as their primary income source.
Full-time workers and households who receive disability benefits are the most likely to experience very low food security, with rates of 40% and 43% respectively. This is due in large part to low wages, irregular work, and inadequate disability benefit amounts. Two in five households who reported working full time earned less than $2,000 a month, or $11.50 per hour.

These high rates of very low food security among the full-time employed illustrate the precarity of work for many low-income households. Policy proposals that could increase the security of work include an increase in the minimum wage, which remains at $7.25 per hour in Pennsylvania, and "fair work week" legislation that requires companies to give employees their schedules at least two weeks in advance.



Low wages, precarious work, and fixed incomes are the primary drivers of visits to the charitable food system, not unemployment.
Nearly nine in ten pantry visitors (87%) reported their income sources were Social Security or pension (39%), full-time work (20%), disability or SSI (20%) or part-time work (8%).

Chronic health concerns are the most common intersecting issue with food insecurity for Centre County pantry visitors.
Three in five (61%) survey respondents reported that they or a member of their household had been diagnosed with at least one diet-related health condition like high blood pressure (45%), diabetes (39%), heart disease (17%), or kidney

disease (10%). This is the highest rate found in any county where Community Hunger Mapping has been completed so far. This finding may relate in part to the large share of Centre County pantry visitors who are seniors, but more than half of non-senior households (53%) reported a chronic health concern, which is still a very high prevalence.

The charitable food system should therefore work to source healthy foods and offer choice distribution models that allow visitors to meet their dietary needs and choose the foods that work for them. There may be opportunities to partner with health systems to implement Food as Medicine programming or other collaborative efforts to implement Food as Medicine programming or other cooperative tools to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health. For example, expanding the provision of produce across the charitable food system, including in Centre County, could help support population health aspects of Food as Medicine programs.

Pantry visitors stated that high transportation and housing costs limit their ability to afford food.

Three in ten (31%) pantry visitors had to choose between groceries and utilities in the prior year; a quarter (25%) chose between food and their rent or mortgage. Another quarter (25%) chose between transportation costs and food. Households with children were the most likely to be forced to make these tradeoffs.

The high cost of living and ongoing price inflation have made it much harder for many households across Centre County to make ends meet. The charitable food system cannot solve these underlying intersecting challenges alone, but it can promote or provide referrals to utility assistance programs and provide flexibilities for pantry users with transportation difficulties, such as proxy pick-ups or even home delivery where capacity allows.

Partnerships and the Charitable Food System's Unique Role in Fighting Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is one of the most pressing and thorny challenges today's society faces. Effective work to address hunger will require collective action from a wide variety of people. Every individual, organization, and sector has a unique contribution to make toward alleviating food insecurity in Centre County. The charitable food network's role should be to leverage its position as a trusted low-barrier social service provider and increase access by adjusting policies like hours and intake practices. Centre County's food pantries already substantively reduce hunger, but they can create even more impact via such changes.

Contributions that can be made from other Centre County stakeholders, like government, business, education, and private individuals as well as nonprofit organizations outside the charitable food system, include investing in charitable food providers, connecting people to programs for which they are eligible, and working together to address upstream and intersecting issues through research, advocacy, and policy change. Only by working together can Centre County meet the needs of neighbors today and while striving to end hunger tomorrow.

Methods

Emphasizing voices and experiences of neighbors

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 Centre County, as well as the input of community leaders and food pantry providers. Data and quotes included in this report are de-identified to the greatest extent possible to maintain the privacy of participants. Each method of data collection is described in turn below.



Data

from multiple state and national organizations

Secondary Analysis

This report's secondary analysis draws upon data from a variety of different sources, including the American Community Survey 2018-2022 and 2019-2023 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 2025 and 2026 data with 2023 and 2024 food insecurity estimates. Data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, and Pennsylvania Department of Education is used as well. 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. Section 1 of this report discusses food insecurity rates and numbers for Centre County as a whole using 2024 food insecurity estimates published by Feeding America in Summer 2026. However, throughout the rest of the report, food insecurity rates and numbers by census tract use 2023 estimates, as the 2024 publication date was too near to the final publication date for CPFB researchers to have sufficient time to update analyses for geographies smaller than the county.



13

pantry sites were visited and observed

Visits and Non-Participant Observations at Food Pantries

To include as many agency partners as possible in the Community Hunger Mapping process, CPFB researchers visited nine pantries through neighbor surveys and four 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.

11 agencies representatives participated in listening sessions

Partner Listening Sessions

CPFB agency partners from Centre County were invited to attend a listening session to discuss strengths and challenges at the pantry level. The discussion allowed for partners to identify and learn from each other's experiences and perspectives as pantry leaders within the community. Discussion topics included pantry and community strengths, sourcing and logistics, and challenges related to distribution. The CPFB research team held one virtual listening session. A total of 11 individuals participated in the listening sessions, representing 7 different agencies.

266

surveys were completed across 9 different locations

12

pantries completed online and phone interviews

Neighbor Surveys

In Fall 2025, CPFB researchers conducted surveys at nine geographically and demographically representative food pantries across Centre County. A total of 266 surveys were completed across the nine 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.

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 Centre 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 12 pantries completed surveys via mail, email, and online. CPFB researchers worked to include relevant information on access components like hours of operation for non-respondents using other relevant data sources.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE: PENN STATE UNIVERSITY AND STUDENTS IN CENTRE COUNTY

Centre County is unique among central Pennsylvania's counties in that a large proportion of its total population is affiliated with higher education, either via their student status or as an employee of Penn State University.

As of the 2024 5-Year ACS, the county's population was 158,576 individuals; according to enrollment data for Fall 2024, there were 42,619 undergraduate students enrolled at Penn State University – Main Campus, meaning that undergraduates accounted for more than a quarter (26.9%) of the county's population.

Another 6,281 graduate or professional students were enrolled at University Park in 2024, bringing the total student population to 48,900, or nearly a third (30.8%) of all Centre County residents.

Penn State also employs approximately 16,000 full-time faculty and staff at University Park, equivalent to about a tenth of the county's population, and the university has economic impact extending well beyond direct employment throughout the county through the presence of its academics, research, and athletics.

These factors combine to give Centre County several unusual demographic characteristics compared to its neighbors, including but not limited to a disproportionately large population of childless young adults with low or no incomes, a high educational attainment rate, a relatively high median income among family households, and more racial and ethnic diversity than observed in most other central Pennsylvania counties.

These factors have resulted in secondary data limitations and challenges in understanding localized food insecurity rates in the State College area, as Feeding America does not produce census-level estimates in tracts with large student populations. Throughout this report, such data limitations are discussed and addressed to the furthest possible degree in order to provide context and clarity.

This project assesses the charitable food system as it serves and is accessible to all Centre County residents, regardless of student status.

This means that there were not primary data collection initiatives conducted at campus pantries or other programs aimed primarily at serving the student population, but students accessing the broader charitable food system were not excluded from participation in the project. Specific questions regarding student status or educational attainment were not asked as part of primary data collection.

More research would be needed to more accurately assess if and to what extent students are visiting traditional food pantries in Centre County, especially since the bulk of primary data collection in the State College area was conducted in August 2025, prior to the beginning of the fall semester.



Section One





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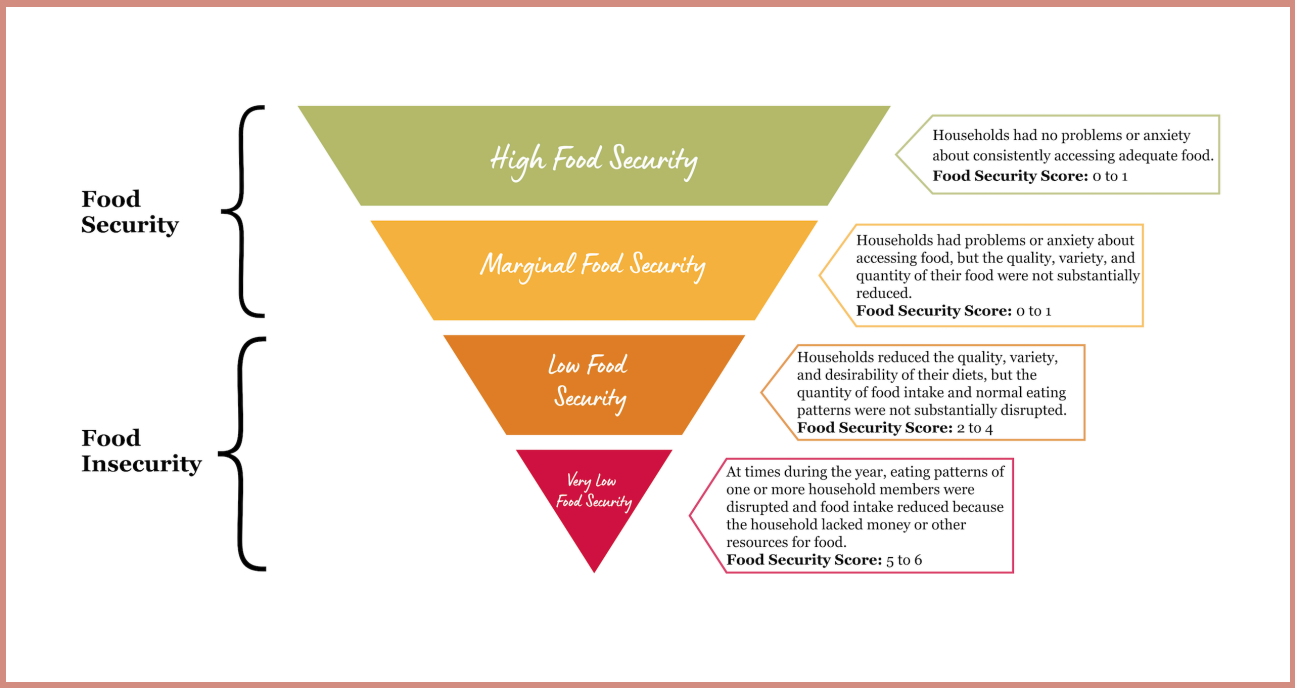
Food Insecurity Analysis

Section 1

Food Insecurity Analysis

Food Insecurity Defined: 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 does not measure hunger itself, which 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 immense potential to impact very low food security. Therefore, the charitable food system across Centre County should focus first and foremost on reducing very low food security.



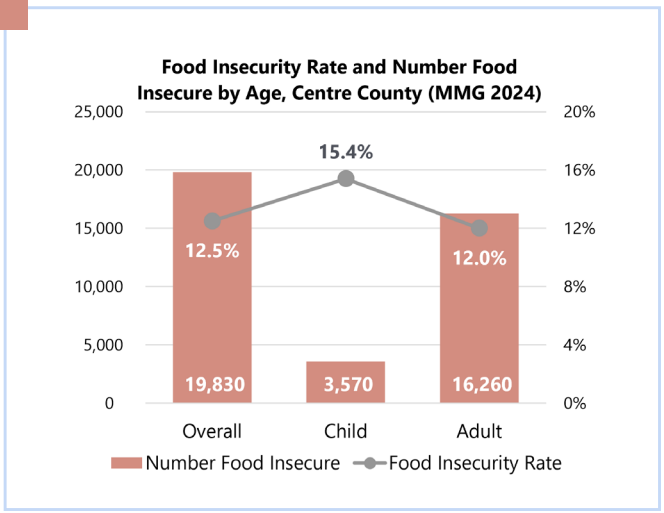
Food Insecurity in Centre County

Centre County's food insecurity rate stood at 12.5% as of 2024 according to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap estimates. About one in eight residents of the county, or nearly 20,000 people, faced uncertain or limited access to food because of a lack of money to buy groceries.

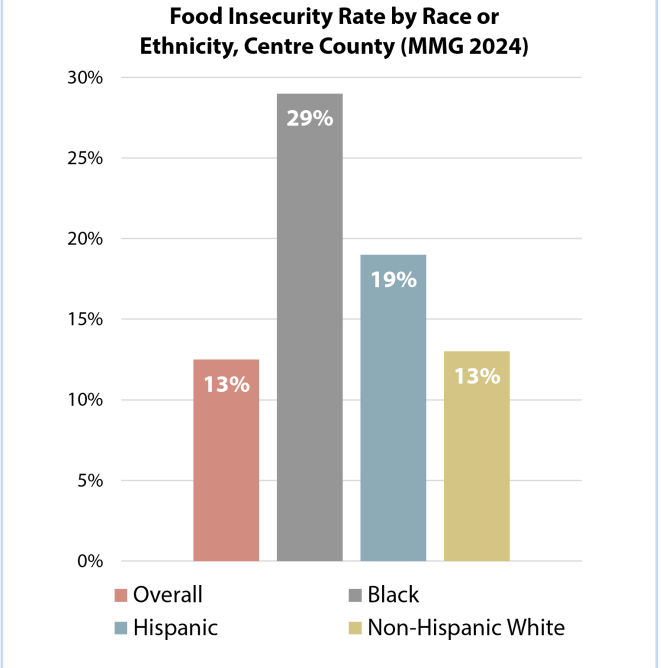
Food insecurity is unevenly distributed across the county, both by geography and by demographic; although it touches every single borough, township, and neighborhood, some communities are more likely to experience hunger than others.

For example, children in Centre County are more likely to be food insecure than adults as of 2024, with a food insecurity rate of 15.4% compared to 12.0%. This 28% differential is the smallest in the CPFB's service territory, potentially because Centre County has the highest median income and educational attainment among family households in the CPFB's service territory as of 2024, but it nevertheless remains salient. Regardless of its prevalence, child food insecurity is a critical issue; food insecurity among young people is associated with long-term negative outcomes, such as decreased educational and career attainment throughout their adult lives.[3]

Centre County sees much more substantial disparities in food insecurity by race and ethnicity than by age. Black and Hispanic individuals are much more likely to face food insecurity than non-Hispanic white individuals, with rates of 29%, 19%, and 13% respectively. Black residents of Centre County are more than twice as likely to experience uncertain or limited food access than their non-Hispanic white peers. Hispanic individuals have a food insecurity rate 46% higher than that of non-Hispanic white individuals.



Centre County is unique among CPFB service territory counties in that the non-Hispanic white food insecurity rate is equal to the overall rate; in most counties, food insecurity rates are lower for non-Hispanic white residents. This implies that there is another group for which data is not provided that is pulling the overall average down. In Centre County, this group is likely the Asian community. Feeding America does not produce disaggregated estimates for Asians, and there is a sizable population of Asian individuals in the county.



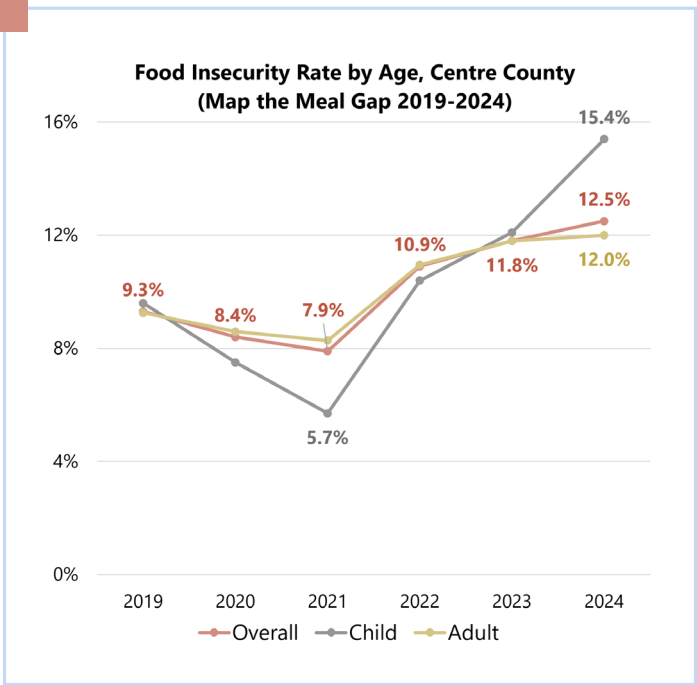
FOOD INSECURITY IN CENTRE COUNTY OVER TIME

Centre County's food insecurity rates have changed over the last several years, with the most dramatic shifts in prevalence observed among children.

Food insecurity was on a broadly downward trend beginning in 2019, with extremely low rates observed in 2021. In that year, all-age food insecurity stood at a low of 7.9%, 15% below the 2019 rate of 9.3%, and child food insecurity was even lower, at 5.7%; this was a 40% decline from the 9.6% child food insecurity rate seen in 2019.

Unfortunately, these decreases in food insecurity were followed by a corresponding rebound, bringing both child and all-age food insecurity to rates well above the previous status quo.

Between 2021 and 2022 alone, all-age food insecurity rates rose 38%, and child food insecurity rates skyrocketed 82% to 10.4%.



Food insecurity rates continued to rise in Centre County in 2023 and 2024, with the 2024 overall rate of 12.5% landing about 60% above 2021's low rate.

Child food insecurity stood at 15.4% in 2024, nearly triple that of 2021 and more than 60% above 2019.

The unprecedented one-year increases in food insecurity seen between 2021 and 2022 and the smaller increases observed in subsequent years were the result of several factors, including high grocery inflation and the expiration of certain public policies that had driven drops in poverty and food insecurity in 2021 among children and families. The most notable of these policies was the expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC), though the expiration of SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs) in February 2023 played a role in the rise in overall and adult food insecurity in that year.

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 child tax credit amount for that year from $2,000 per child to $3,600 per child under the age of six, or $3,000 per child aged six to seventeen.[4] This version of CTC was fully refundable and paid out in the form of monthly $250 or $300 payments rather than as a lump sum at tax time.[5] These changes to the credit's design increased its utility to very low-income households.

Many households would not have qualified for the traditional CTC at all, as they may not have met the minimum income thresholds.

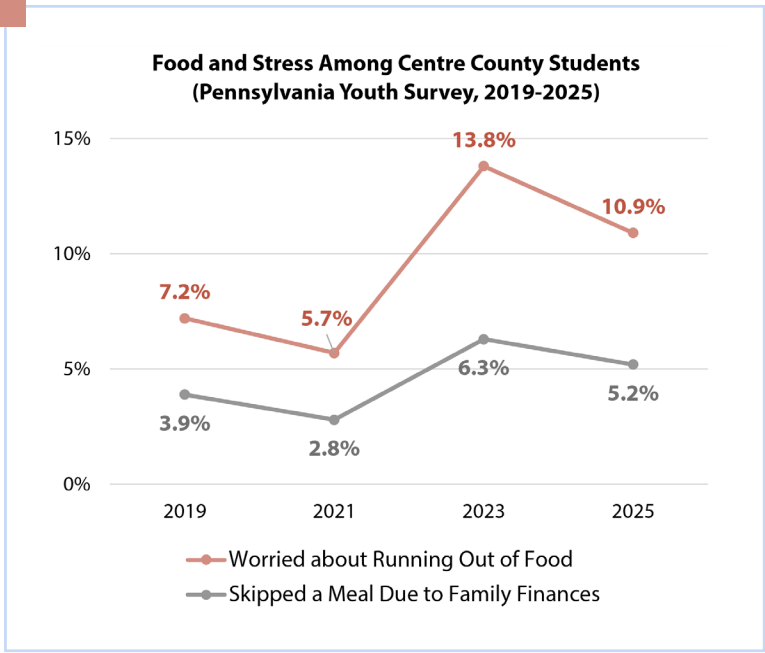
The positive impact of the expanded CTC on child poverty and food insecurity was evident both nationally and locally. Across the country, the expanded CTC lifted 2.1 million children out of poverty [6] and was the key driver of the largest decrease in food insecurity for children on record.[7]

This data clearly demonstrates that targeted investments of sufficient scale can meaningfully reduce food insecurity among children and push all-age food insecurity below its previous floor, a result that economic growth and low unemployment have not been able to accomplish alone.

Since the expansion expired, the CTC has returned to having a maximum value of $2,000 (although it will increase by $200 in this tax year), is again paid annually rather than monthly, and excludes the lowest income households. These policy reversions have severely curtailed the CTC's impact on child poverty and food insecurity.

Data from the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency provide additional perspective on child food insecurity in Centre County and across Pennsylvania.

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; as of 2025, one in ten children (10.9%) worried about running out of food, and one in twenty (5.2%) had skipped a meal in the last year because their family lacked sufficient money for food.



These rates are lower than the statewide average rates of 18.3% and 9.2% respectively[8] and do not mirror the trend observed in the 2024 Map the Meal Gap estimates for Centre County, but they nevertheless highlight the importance of addressing child food insecurity.

Importantly, rates for each category in 2021, the year in which the expanded CTC and universal school meals were in effect, were markedly lower in Centre County at 5.7% and 2.8% respectively.

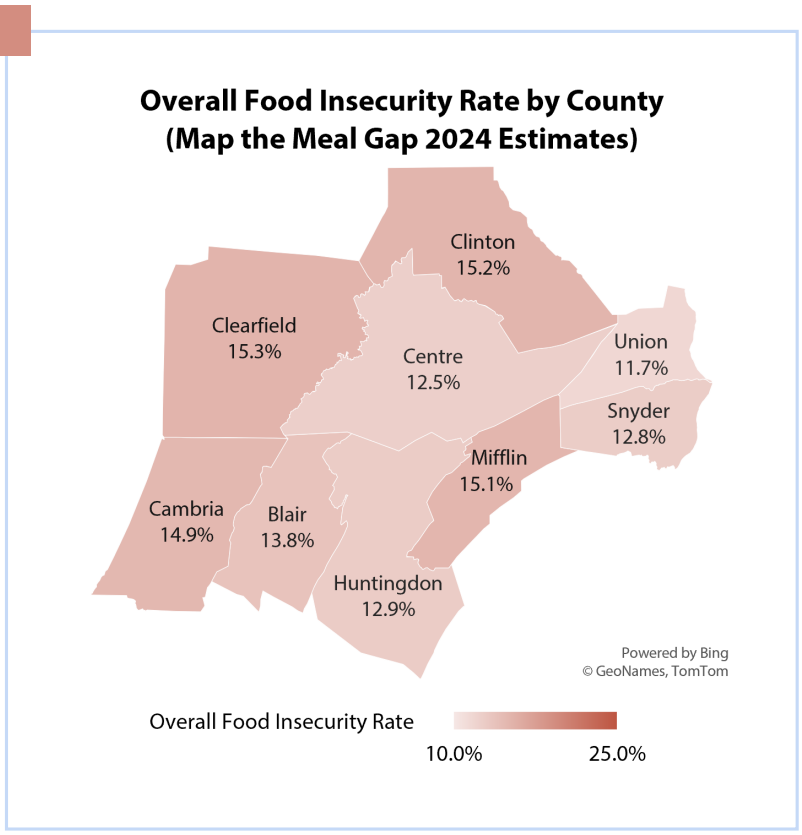
These findings provide highly compelling evidence of the meaningful impact the expanded CTC, universal school lunch, and other temporary programs in effect at that time had on children and families and could have in the future if reimplemented.

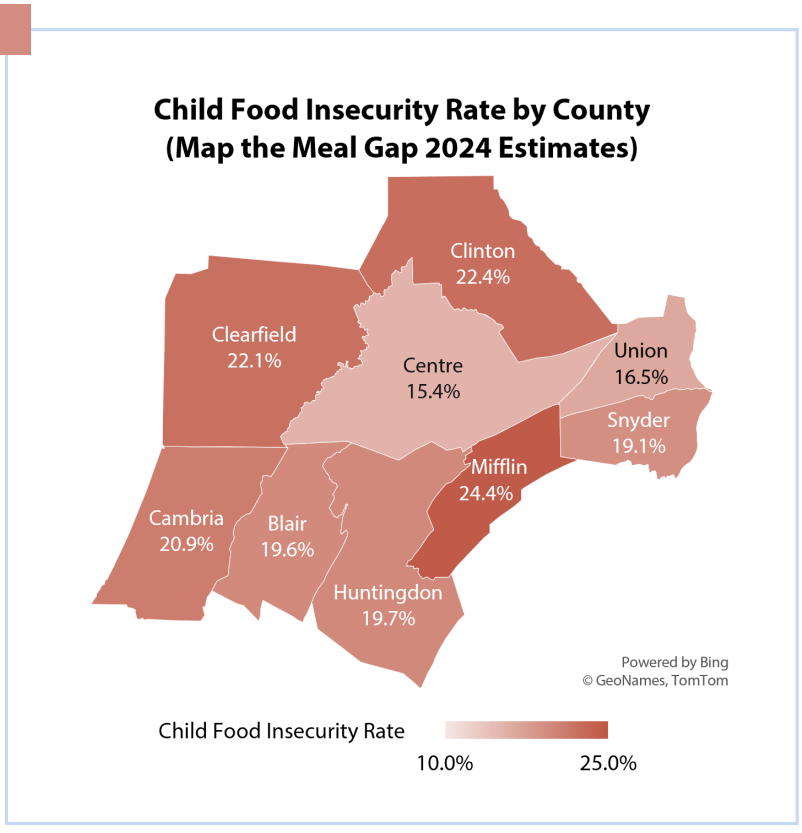
FOOD INSECURITY IN CENTRE COUNTY IN REGIONAL CONTEXT

Centre County's overall food insecurity rate of 12.5% is about 7% lower than the Pennsylvania statewide food insecurity rate of 13.5% as of 2024.

The county lies in a region with mixed food insecurity rates – all-age food insecurity rates among Centre County and its neighbors ranged from a low of 11.7% in Union County to a high of 15.3% in Clinton County, for a total spread across the counties of more than three points.

Meanwhile, Centre County's child food insecurity rate is about 20% lower than the statewide average as of 2024, at 15.4% compared to 19.3%. Centre is a regional outlier as well, with a child food insecurity rate more a point below the neighboring county with the next lowest child food insecurity rate, Snyder County (16.5%). Centre County's child food insecurity rate was about three quarters that of several of its neighbors, including Clinton (22.4%), Huntingdon (19.7%) Cambria (20.9%), Clearfield (22.1%), and Mifflin (24.4%); in these counties as many as one in four children experienced food insecurity as of 2024, while in Centre, one in six children had uncertain or limited food access.





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 have historically provided breakdowns on the prevalence of food insecurity by household type at the national level. As of the most recent and final USDA report, which provides statistics for 2024, food insecurity by household type broke down as follows:

- Households with children had a food insecurity rate of 18.4%.
  - Single female-headed households with children had the highest food insecurity rates at 36.8%.
  - Single male-headed households with children had lower but still elevated rates of 23.8%.
- Households without children had a food insecurity rate of 11.9%.
- Households with seniors had a food insecurity rate of 9.9%, which is the lowest food insecurity rate of any household type other than households without children and more than one adult (9.4%).
- Elderly living alone households had a slightly higher food insecurity rate of 11.3%, but this was lower than working-age women or men households who live alone (16.2% and 14.7%, respectively).[9]



17.9% for households with children

11.9% for households without children

9.3% for households with seniors

11.3% for elderly living alone

Sub-County Food Insecurity Rate and Number in Centre County

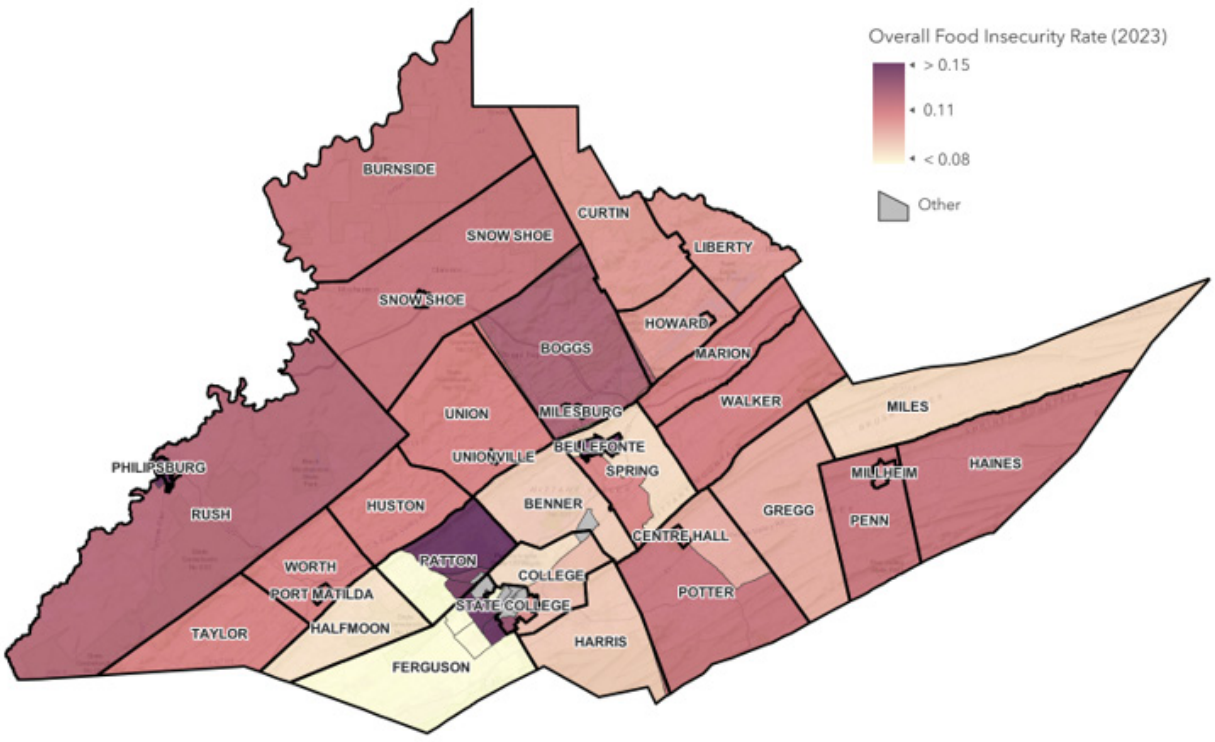
Food insecurity touches every community in Centre County, but food insecurity rates and the number of food insecure individuals vary across the region. This section assesses food insecurity rates and the number of food insecure individuals by census tract across Centre County as of 2023. Census tracts are used as the unit of analysis in this section for several reasons; first and foremost, they are the smallest geography for which Feeding America produces food insecurity estimates. Census tracts are relatively even in population and, in Pennsylvania, usually align neatly with neighborhoods in cities or boroughs and align with municipalities in suburban and rural areas, making them helpful geographic units to use when comparing the dispersion of food insecurity across different localities.

FOOD INSECURITY RATE BY CENSUS TRACT

Food insecurity rates across Centre County's census tracts ranged from a low of 4.5% to a high of 20.2% as of 2023. Because of the presence of Penn State University's main campus and the large student population in and around State College, there are a number of census tracts in and around the university for which estimates are not available; this lack should not be taken to imply that food insecurity is not an issue in these areas or among students. Indeed, national research shows that as of 2020, 22.6% of undergraduate students and 12.2% of graduate students experienced food insecurity.[10]

Food insecurity estimates are also not available for the census tract containing State Correctional Institution – Benner and State Correctional Institution – Rockview, which extends across parts of Benner and College townships.

Food Insecurity Rate By Census Tract, Centre County (Map the Meal Gap 2023 Estimates)



Although SCI – Rockview is no longer in operation as of the publication of this report, it was open in 2023,[11] the year of data used for this analysis.

As shown in the map on the previous page, high food insecurity rates are most often found in densely populated areas; the with the single highest food insecurity rate lies in Patton Township, just north of State College. One in five residents of this tract is food insecure.

Other areas with food insecurity rates of 15% or more include the eastern section of Ferguson Township, immediately west of State College; the entirety of the borough of Bellefonte; and most of the borough of Philipsburg, along with small parts of adjacent Rush Township.

On the other hand, low food insecurity rates (below 10%) sit mainly in the immediate State College suburbs, in areas like College, Benner, and Harris townships, as well as western Patton Township, western Ferguson Township, and Halfmoon Township.

The portion of Spring Township east of Bellefonte and Miles Township in far eastern Centre County also have low food insecurity rates. Moderate food insecurity rates, falling within a few points of the countywide average, prevail elsewhere in the county.

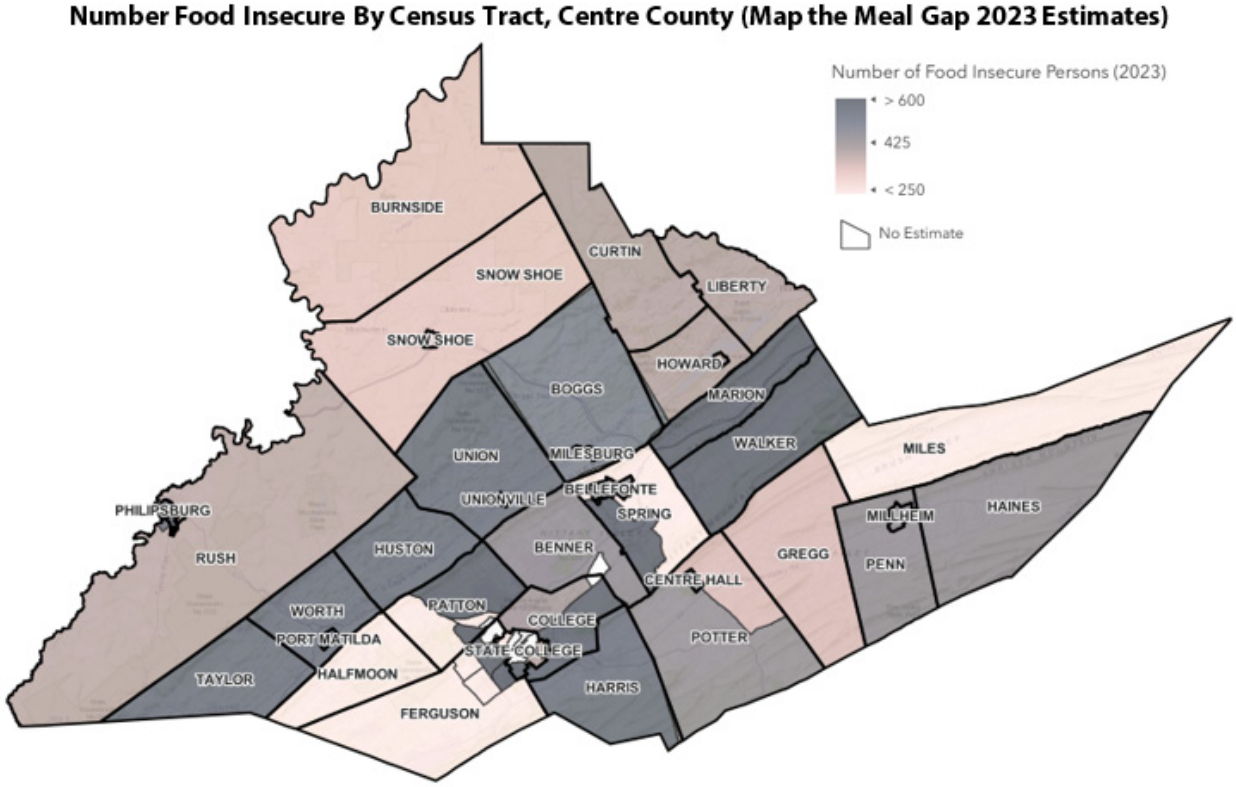
NUMBER OF FOOD INSECURE INDIVIDUALS BY CENSUS TRACT

Switching lenses to view the number of food insecure individuals by census tract reveals different patterns in the dispersion of food insecurity across Centre County. It should be noted in this context that, although specific localized figures are not available for nine of Centre County's census tracts, it is possible to derive the total number of food insecure individuals residing in these tracts by subtracting the total number of food insecure individuals in census tracts with estimates from the countywide estimated total.

This method results in an estimated 5,100 food insecure individuals living within the nine census tracts without tract-level estimates, for an average food insecurity rate of 13.0%, well above the countywide average of 11.8% as of 2023.

Given that six of these tracts are in State College borough and two more lie in Patton and Ferguson townships in the immediate vicinity of Penn State University, this finding again underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the need for food assistance among the university community.

In census tracts where specific estimates are available, the number of food insecure individuals by tract ranges from a low of 80 to a high of 730. The census tract with the single largest food insecure population lies in southwestern State College borough and is one of only two tracts in the municipality for which data is available. The 730 food insecure residents of this census tract account for 3.8% of the countywide food insecure population even though the tract contributes just 3.4% of the county's total population.



Coming in a close second, with 710 food insecure residents, is the tract covering eastern Patton Township. Food insecurity's burden is even more disproportionate in this area; 3.7% of Centre County's food insecure population resides in eastern Patton Township even though it is home to 2.2% of county residents.

Other areas with 500 or more food insecure individuals include the tract covering Marion and Walker townships in the northeast of the county; eastern Ferguson Township immediately adjacent to State College; a tract in southern Patton Township bordering Ferguson Township; southwestern Spring Township outside Bellefonte; a tract covering Boggs Township and Milesburg; most of Philipsburg; and a very large tract extending from Taylor Township to Union Township, including Port Matilda and Unionville as well as their surrounding townships.

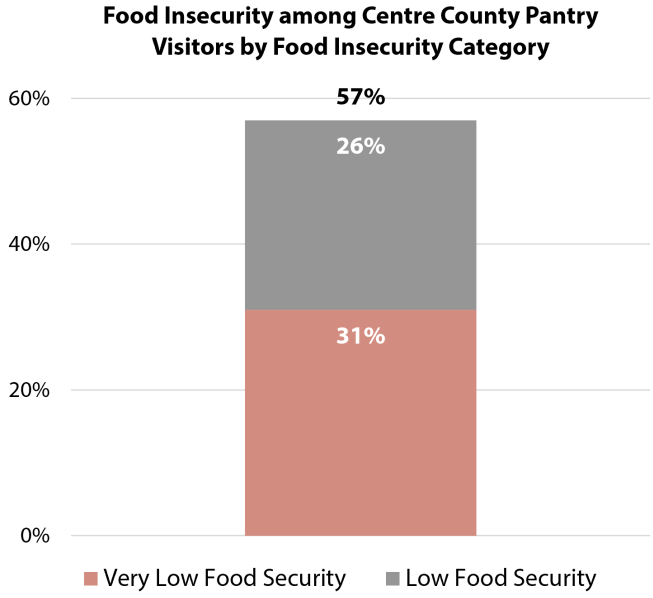
Most of the rest of the county is covered by tracts with moderate numbers of food insecure individuals. Miles Township, eastern Spring Township, Halfmoon Township, and small parts of Ferguson Township, Patton Township, and extreme northwestern State College are the only areas of the county with fewer than 250 food insecure individuals.

The Extent of Food Insecurity among Pantry Visitors in Centre County

Just under three in five food pantry visitors (57%) in Centre County reported experiencing food insecurity, a proportion similar to those observed in broadly similar regions where Community Hunger Mapping has previously been conducted, including Adams County and the Northern Tier, but lower than counties with a more urbanized population, including Lancaster and Dauphin.

The overall proportion of food pantry visitors screening positive for very low food security is unsurprisingly much larger than that seen across the total population, but the degree of hunger among those already seeking assistance is still extremely significant.

Slightly fewer than one in three food pantry visitors (31%) endured very low food security, meaning that despite the fact that they accessed the charitable food system for support, they still went hungry on a regular basis due to a lack of money for food.



Since very low food security is the nearest measurable approximant for the experience of hunger in the United States, the very low food security rate is a crucial metric in assessing the charitable food system's impact and progress.

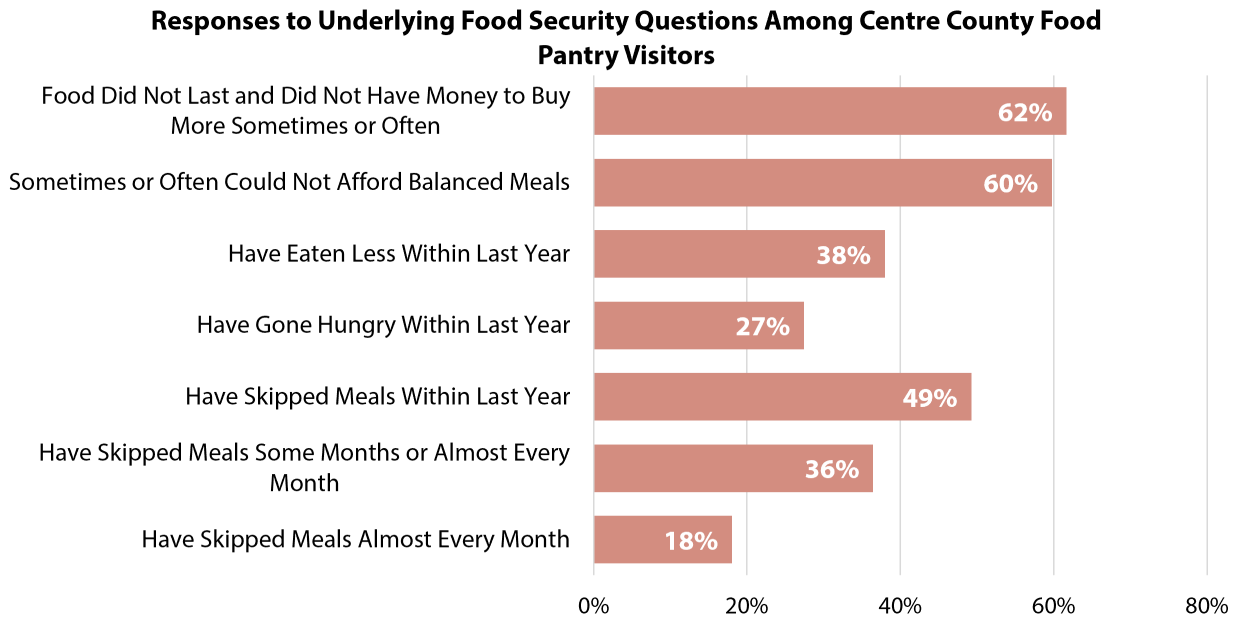
CPFB researchers developed these estimates of the prevalence of low and very low food security among pantry visitors by analyzing the results of surveys conducted at food pantries across the counties that included the six-question short-form USDA Food Security Module.

Answers to the underlying questions, as answered by Centre County pantry visitors, are provided in the figure below.

Three in five (62%) pantry visitors said that "often" or "sometimes" the food they had did not last and they lacked the funds to get more, and a similar proportion said they "sometimes" or "often" could not afford balanced meals.

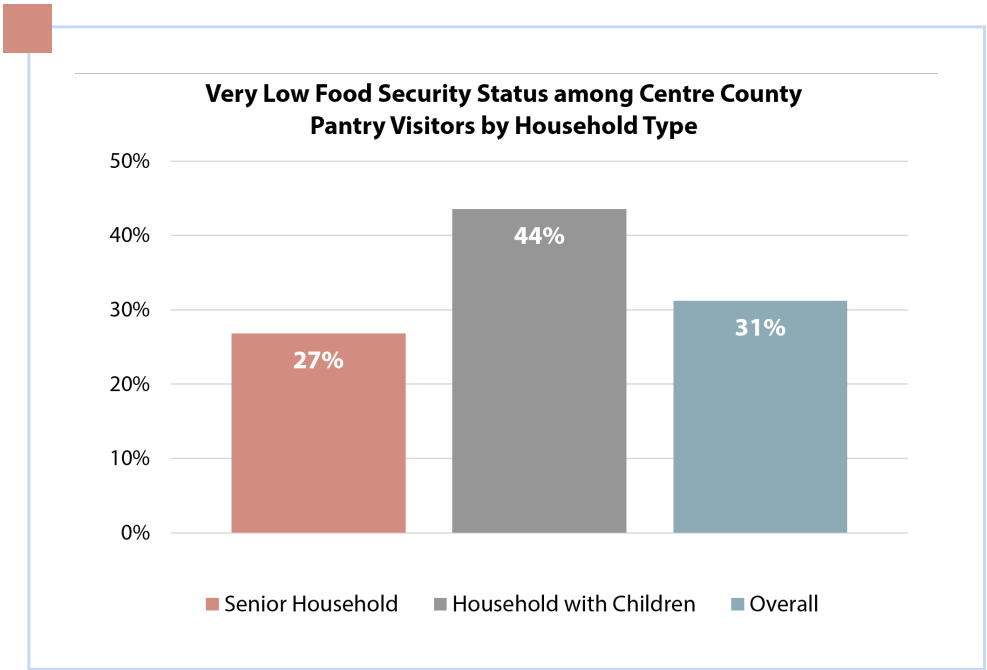
Two in five (41%) had eaten less within the last year, and more than one in four (27%) had gone hungry because they did not have enough money for food; this rate was fairly close to the overall very low food security rate among pantry visitors.

Half (49%) of visitors reported having skipped meals within the last twelve months, including one in five (18%) who had skipped meals almost every month.



Households with children were much more likely than senior-only households to experience very low food security; more than two in five households with children (44%) had skipped or cut the size of their meals in the last year, compared to just over one in four (27%) senior-only households.

Sample sizes were not sufficient to include working-aged households without children in this analysis.



Food Insecurity Main Findings and Recommendations

SECTION 1 FINDING 1:

Nearly 20,000 residents of Centre County face food insecurity as of 2024, including more than 3,500 children. The overall food insecurity rate of 12.5% means that one in eight people living in the county have uncertain or limited access to the food they need to live active, healthy lives.

Every municipality and neighborhood in Centre County is home to neighbors experiencing food insecurity, but there are differences in the prevalence of the issue by age, race, and place. Black and Hispanic households are much more likely than non-Hispanic white neighbors to face food insecurity in Centre County, with rates of 29% and 19% compared to 13% respectively. Children are more vulnerable to food insecurity than adults, with rates of 15.4% compared to 12.0%.

Recommendation:
Comprehensively addressing an issue with the scope and scale of food insecurity will require continuous collaboration and investment from a variety of stakeholders and sectors, including government, nonprofits, businesses, and the public. Although food insecurity touches every corner of Centre County, the response to it should be customized to the unique needs and characteristics of each locality.

SECTION 1 FINDING 2:

Food insecurity has increased considerably in Centre County since 2021 and continues to do so. Overall food insecurity rates rose slightly less than 60% over only three years, jumping from 7.9% in 2021 to 12.5% in 2024. Child food insecurity almost tripled in the same time frame, spiking from 5.7% to 15.4%.

Food insecurity among children as measured by the results of a biannual survey of students more than doubled between 2021 and 2023, with the proportion of Centre County children and youth reporting having worried about running out of food in the last year increasing from 5.7% to 13.8%, and the share of children and youth that skipped a meal due to family finances jumping from 2.8% to 6.3%. As of 2025, child food insecurity rates according to this measure had dropped somewhat compared to 2023 but remained well above 2021's low, with 10.9% of students worried about running out of food and 5.2% having skipped a meal in the last year.

Recommendation:
The deepening severity of the food security situation in Centre County means that stakeholders across the county should prioritize taking actions that increase access to food as a basic need for residents. Where possible, governments, grantors, and other interested parties should make investments that can help the charitable food system rise to meet the increasing need in their communities.

FOOD INSECURITY IS A RISING ISSUE



SECTION 1 FINDING 3:

Every community in Centre County is affected by food insecurity. As of 2023, the highest food insecurity rates were found in the State College and Bellefonte areas, though it is important to note that localized estimates are not available for much of downtown State College due to the presence of Penn State University.

Eastern Patton Township, immediately north of State College, has the highest food insecurity rate in the county at 20.2%. Other areas with food insecurity rates above 15% include eastern Ferguson Township, Bellefonte borough, and parts of Philipsburg borough and adjacent Rush Township.

The census tracts with the largest numbers of food insecure individuals generally are those with high food insecurity rates. Analysis of the differential between the countywide food insecure population and census-tract level estimates indicates that as many as three in ten of the county's food insecure individuals live in census tracts for which local data is unavailable. Most of these tracts lie in or near State College.

Recommendation:
Every census tract, neighborhood, and municipality in Centre County is home to food insecure individuals; it is therefore crucial that services exist throughout the county and that residents, including students and other individuals affiliated with Penn State, have meaningful access to them. Focused and ongoing work across the county, with emphasis on the areas with the highest food insecurity rates, is key to making progress towards reducing or eliminating hunger.

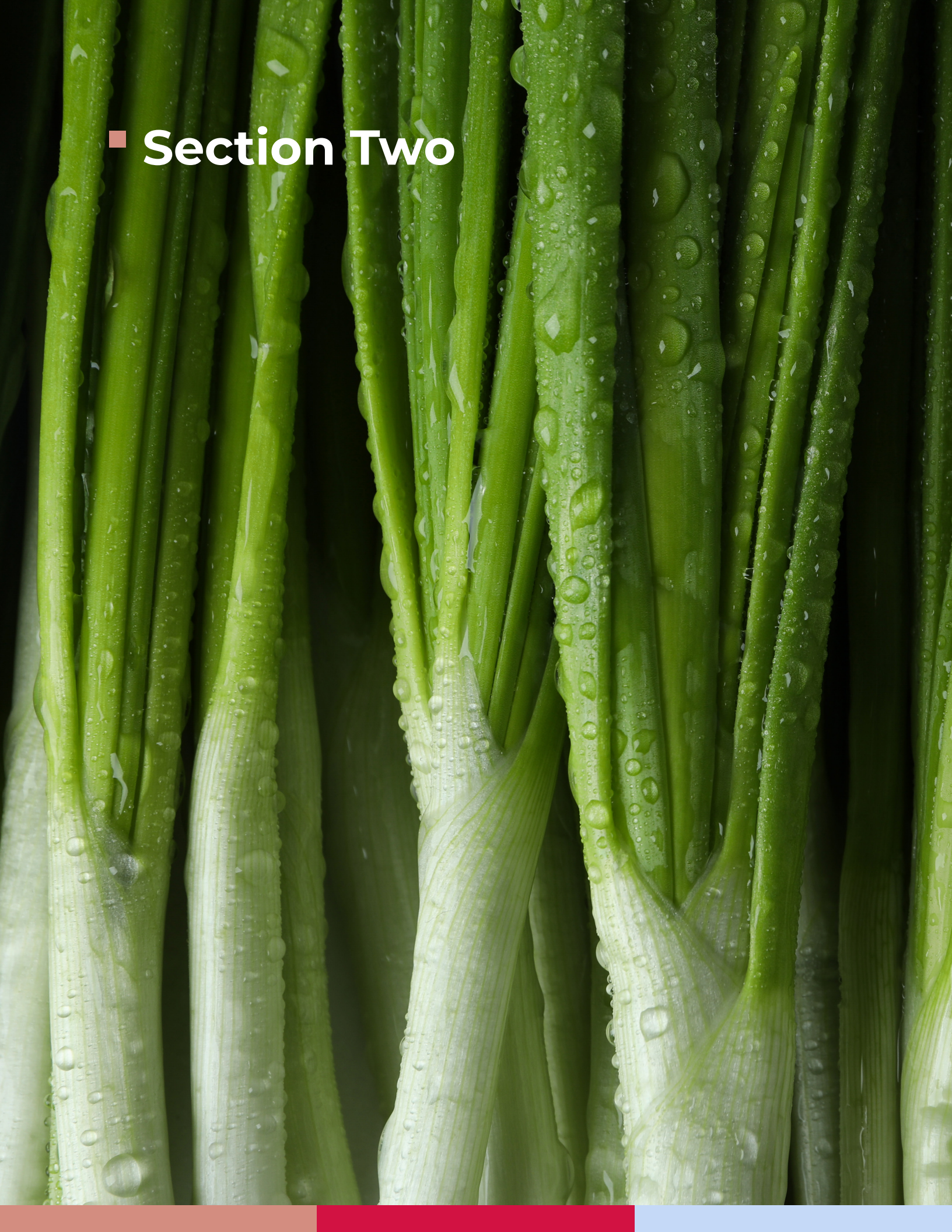
SECTION 1 FINDING 4:

Three in ten (31%) Centre County food pantry visitors reported experiencing very low food security, which is characterized by going without adequate food on a regular basis.

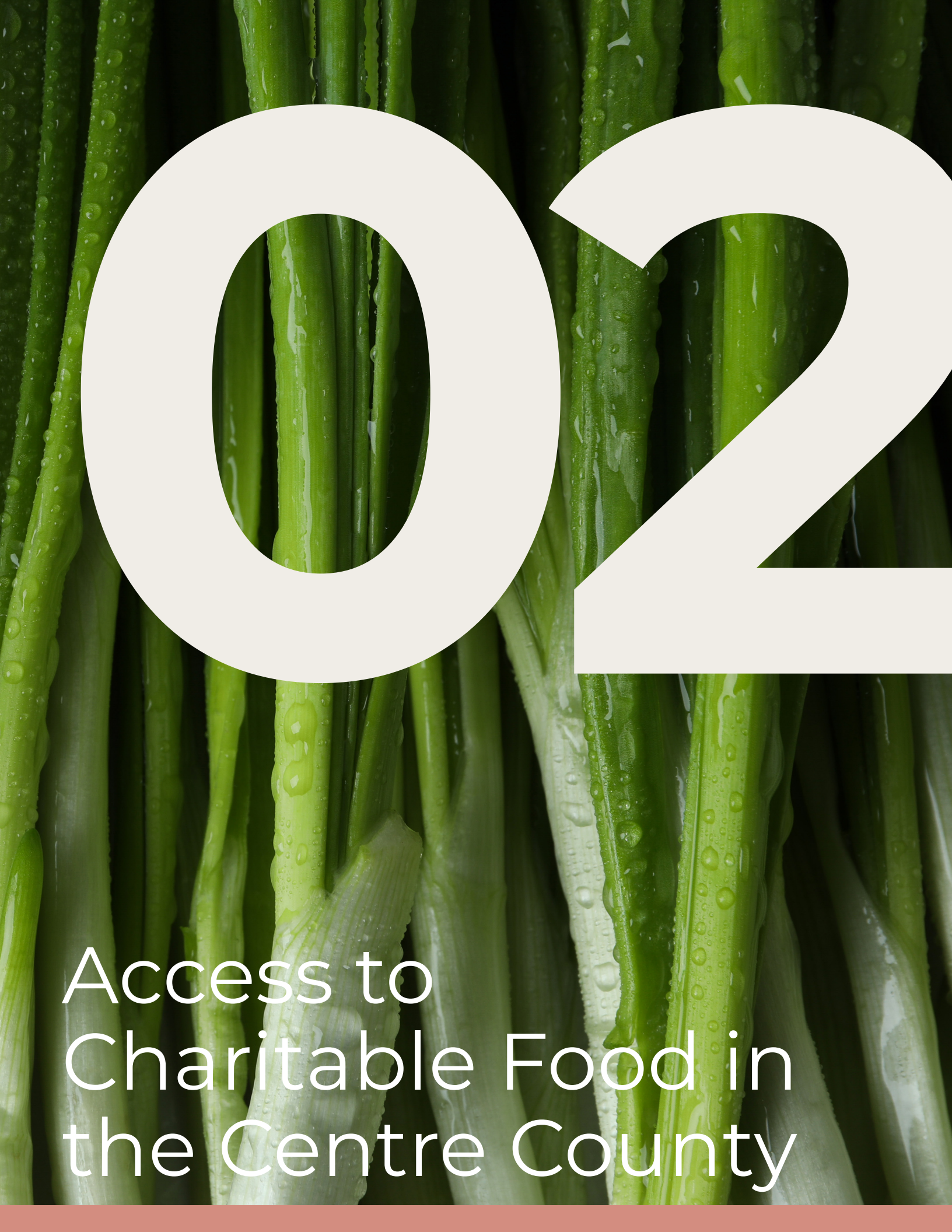
Households with children were more likely to face very low food security than other household types; more than two in five (44%) households with children had survey responses placing them in this category, while the same was true of just over one in four senior-only households.

Recommendation:
Food pantries and other service providers across Centre County should implement policies and programs that seek to reduce very low food security among visitors, with emphasis on ensuring households with children and minoritized households have equitable access to resources. Potential policies and programs might include those focused on expanding access to the charitable food system, such as expanding distribution hours or offering mobile pantries; increasing participation in government programs that support low income individuals and families, like SNAP, WIC, and school meals; and public policy advocacy efforts aimed at increasing the adequacy of incomes, benefits, and economic mobility opportunities.

Very low food security is the best available metric that can be used to assess experiences of hunger and, by extension, is a key measure of the success of the charitable food system's work in Centre County. To better understand if and how they are making progress on this issue, food pantries should implement short annual surveys that can measure multiple dimensions of their services, including the accessibility of and satisfaction with pantry experiences as well as very low food security over time. In the absence of the USDA's annual Household Food Security in the United States report, localized understanding of food insecurity is critically important.



Section Two



02

Access to Charitable Food in the Centre County

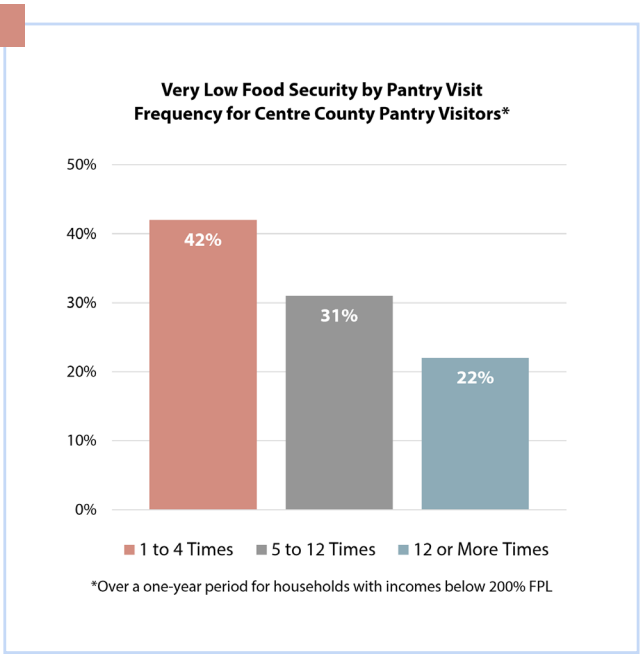
Section Two

Access to Charitable Food in Centre County

Strengths of the Centre County Charitable Food System

The Centre County charitable food network builds upon a variety of strengths that help it be successful in its work to alleviate hunger throughout the county. Neighbor surveys show that visits to food pantries truly do ameliorate experiences of food insecurity, and geographic pantry access across the county is strong.

Every census tract across Centre County can access at least one food pantry without a substantial travel burden and 96% of food insecure live in census tracts within 15 minutes of two or more pantries.



Additionally, almost two thirds of neighbors said that they receive food they need, want, and will use when they visit pantries. Very few neighbors mentioned having had an experience of judgment when visiting, further highlighting the positive interactions most neighbors have at food pantries across the county.

IMPACT OF THE CHARITABLE FOOD SYSTEM IN CENTRE COUNTY

The Centre County charitable food system has a major impact on experiences of hunger among its visitors. Food insecurity rates among pantry visitors with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty line who accessed charitable food assistance twelve or more times in the last year were about half that of those in the same income bracket who visited only a few times, at 22% compared to 42%.

In other words, two in five low-income households who visited food pantries quarterly or less in the last year experienced hunger, compared with one in five similar households who visited more than once a month. Households who visited the charitable food system between five and twelve times in the last year fell in the middle, with three in ten (31%) having experienced very low food security in that time frame.

Overall, these findings show that the charitable food network truly is effective in its work to reduce hunger among those it serves, and that its impact is magnified among households who can receive more support.

These findings therefore emphasize the importance of lowering barriers to access, such as limited days and hours of service, and increasing the number of services households can receive services by reducing or eliminating visit frequency restrictions. In light of the very large reduction in experiences of hunger among households who can visit a food pantry or mobile distribution more than once a month, the Centre County charitable food system should work to ensure that all neighbors can visit at least two distributions per month, regardless of whether that is at a single location or spread across multiple agencies.

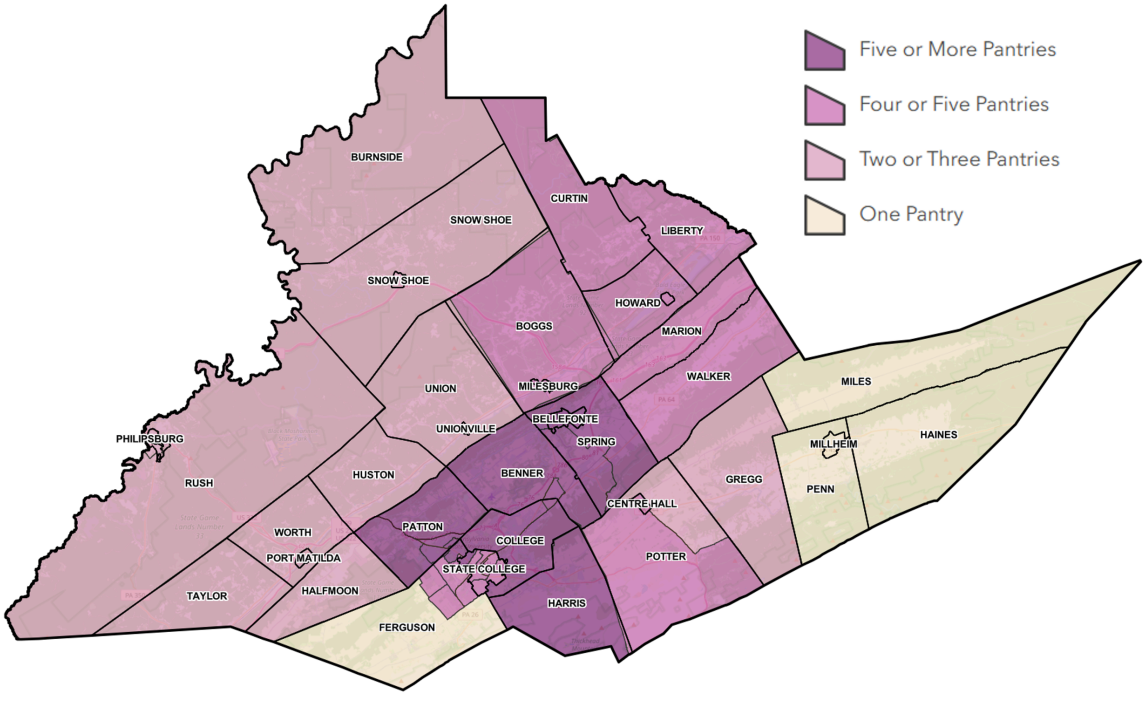
GEOGRAPHIC PANTRY ACCESS

To understand access to charitable food at a sub-county level, the following analysis examines the number of CPFB partner food pantries and mobile distributions within a 15-minute drive time of each of Centre County's census tracts. The analysis' parameters are limited to distribution points everyone can access without restrictions based on demographic characteristics such as age or military history.

Therefore, youth programs, MilitaryShares, Fresh Express distributions exclusively serving residents of specific low-income housing complexes, and senior programs are not included in the below maps or discussions.

Overall pantry access in Centre County is strong, as shown in the map above. All county residents have at least one food pantry or mobile distribution within a 15-minute drive time, and the vast majority of food insecure individuals in the county (95.6%) have geographic access to two or more.

Number of Food Pantries or Open Mobile Distributions Within



This figure is inclusive of areas for which there are not specific census-tract level estimates, including downtown State College and other areas in the vicinity of Penn State University; although the exact distribution of food insecure individuals across these tracts is not known, their residents can reach at least four, and in some cases as many as ten, food distributions within a 15-minute drive time.

Just two areas of Centre County – southwestern Ferguson Township and the Penns Valley area in the eastern panhandle of the county – have access to only one food pantry. Since the southwestern census tract in Ferguson Township is primarily covered by state game lands, the Penns Valley area should be considered the county's prime candidate for charitable food access expansion.

More than 70% of food insecure individuals in the county who have access to only one pantry reside in this area.

Although this map shows the number of pantries and mobile distributions within a reasonable drive time, it should not be considered to be an authoritative representation of meaningful charitable food access.

There may be a variety of non-geographic constraints that prevent neighbors from accessing services despite geographic proximity, including strict service territories, infrequent or incompatible distribution hours, burdensome paperwork and intake requirements, limited frequency or adequacy of service, or other program restrictions like requiring a referral to utilize services, such as visit frequency limits (i.e. allowing households to receive only one service per month, even if an agency is open more often).

Furthermore, some agencies may have policies discouraging or preventing neighbors from receiving services from more than one pantry or distribution, even if they reside within the service areas of multiple agencies, meaning that some individuals may not be able to benefit from the full array of charitable food services available to them. In light of the data showing that the ability to receive more than one service per month has a meaningful effect on experiences of very low food security, these restrictions constrict the impact of the Centre County charitable food network.

Additionally, this analysis does not account for any gaps in awareness of local services. Even in areas with an abundance of service offerings, neighbors in need may not know enough about them to use them effectively. For these reasons, the above analysis provides an overestimate of access. Further analyses in this report will attempt to account for some, but not all, of these other potential barriers to access.

Food Insecure Individuals Per Pantry within 15-Minute Drive Time

While the map in the prior section effectively illustrates the geographic dispersion of charitable food distribution points and helps highlight areas with few pantries, it does not account for the differing population density across the county. That is, it is important to keep in mind that some areas have larger food insecure populations than others and thus might need more access points in order to ensure all neighbors can receive adequate services.

The map to the right shows the number of food insecure individuals per food pantry or open mobile distribution site within a 15-minute drive time of each census tract's center of population. This measure 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 may be limited because there is a very large number of neighbors who have geographic access to only one or two distribution points.

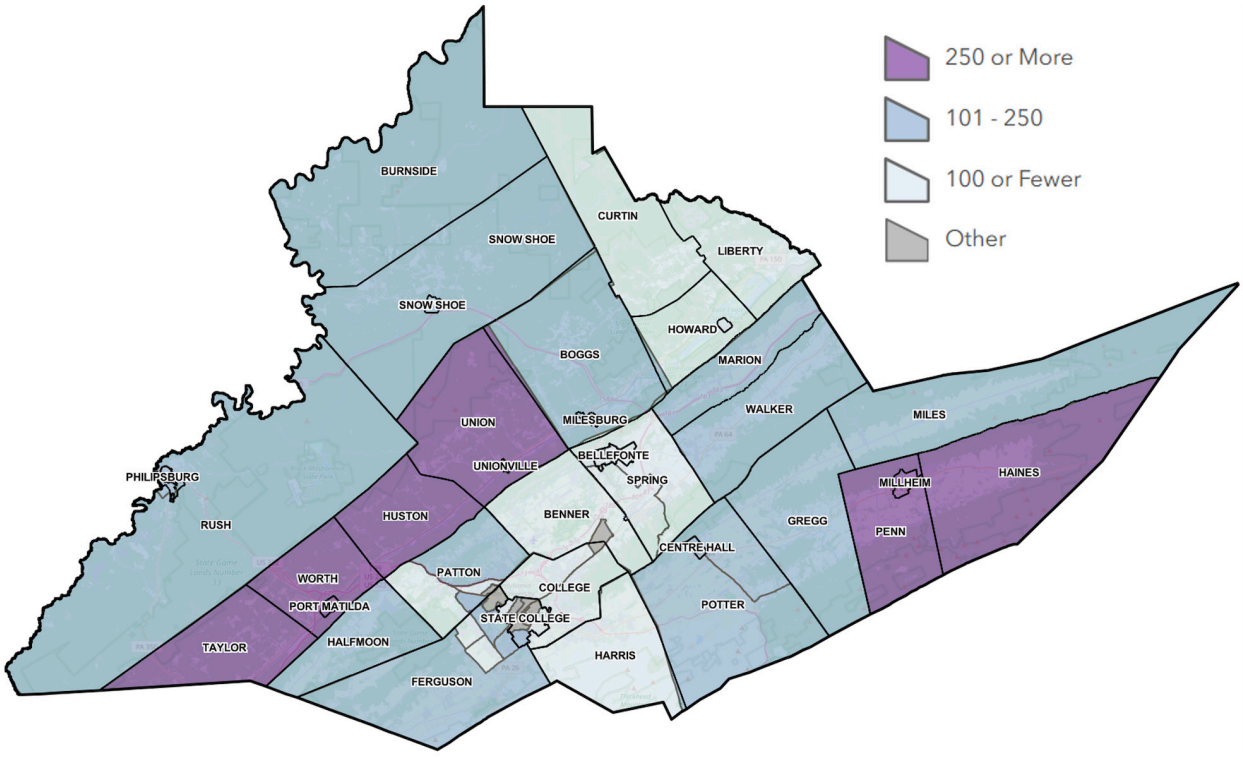
As mentioned in the previous section, the Penns Valley area, covering Miles, Haines, and Penn townships as well as the borough of Millheim, has local access to only one distribution. The southern half of this area has a large number of food insecure individuals per pantry, at 460; the less populous northern census tract adds another 150 food insecure individuals with access to only one pantry, bringing the total number of neighbors potentially reliant on a single agency to more than 600.

Another area with a large number of food insecure neighbors per pantry is the census tract stretching from Taylor Township in the southwest to Union Township in the central part of the county. In this area, 550 individuals have nearby access to just two distributions, putting the total number of food insecure individuals per distribution at 275.

The remaining areas of the county all have 250 food insecure individuals per pantry or fewer, including southwestern Ferguson Township, an area previously highlighted as one with only one nearby pantry. As discussed in the prior section, this area is mostly state game lands and as such is lightly populated. However, the number of food insecure individuals per pantry cannot be calculated for census tracts without food insecurity estimates, meaning that for much of downtown State College, this metric is not available.

As discussed in the previous section, all tracts without estimates have access to at least four distributions, so access is still fairly strong. This is especially the case because this report does not consider resources exclusively serving students or other populations affiliated with Penn State University.

Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Pantry or Open Mobile Distribution Within



SATISFACTION WITH FOOD OFFERINGS AND COMMONLY REQUESTED FOODS AT PANTRIES IN CENTRE COUNTY

Another aspect of access is the availability of items that are useful to and preferred by the people who visit the charitable food system. In Centre County, almost two thirds (64.2%) of pantry users reported "often" or "always" being able to acquire the foods they needed and wanted upon visiting.

The fact that such a large proportion of food pantry visitors are satisfied with the food they receive is a strength of the Centre County charitable food system, but room to improve remains, as just over a third of neighbors do not regularly receive items they need, want, and like when they visit.

Neighbor surveys asked participants to list up to three items that they need or want but cannot always get from the food pantry they visit. Three in five Centre County pantry visitors (58.6%) specified at least one item they wanted but could not always find at food pantries.

The most commonly requested item was meat, at almost half (47.4%) of those who made any request, followed closely by fresh produce at about two in five of those who made any request (42.3%).

Reported Food Preferences among Centre County Pantry Visitors

Rank	Product	Percent of Respondents with Preferences	Percent of Total Respondents
1	Meat	47.4%	27.8%
2	Fresh Produce	42.3%	24.8%
3	Bread	10.9%	6.4%
4	Eggs	8.3%	4.9%
5	Cheese	7.7%	4.5%
6	Milk	6.4%	3.8%

(156 of 266 respondents indicated at least one preference)

Including the 41% of pantry visitors who did not share a food preference, more than a quarter of all neighbors expressed a preference for these two items. Bread, eggs, cheese, and milk were also frequently requested, but at a much lower rate than the two leading items. All items listed align with requests and preferences among neighbors in other counties where Community Hunger Mapping has been conducted.

Although there was not sufficient data in Centre County to slice survey results for food preferences by race and ethnicity or specific nationality, pantry coordinators and food sourcing staff should still keep the fact that food preferences vary by culture in mind.

Non-white pantry visitor households were around 10% less likely to report “often or always” receiving preferred foods, with a 60.0% satisfaction rate compared to 66.2% for white households. This shows that there may be opportunity to diversify food offerings to ensure people of all backgrounds can have their preferences met. Pantries that are interested in learning more about cultural food could conduct their own food preference surveys or use other methods of feedback around the items their neighbors are looking for.

The CPFB recently developed a tailored culturally familiar foods guide for central Pennsylvania that can be a helpful resource for pantries looking to expand and diversify their pantry offerings. Other existing resources like the cultural food preference list developed by Food Bank of the Rockies[12] could be helpful for pantries who are looking to expand and diversify their food offerings.



NEIGHBOR TREATMENT AND FEELINGS OF JUDGMENT AT FOOD PANTRIES

Neighbors describe food pantries as being easier to access and more welcoming than other social service providers.[13] 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.

Overall, neighbors reported very few instances of judgmental treatment as pantry visitors. 3.0% of neighbors reported feelings of judgment while visiting a pantry, which is lower than most other counties where Community Hunger Mapping has been completed. Many neighbors said that they had only recently begun utilizing the pantry, and were pleasantly surprised by the experience.

Neighbors also commented positively on the quality and variety of the food they received from the pantries they visit.

Surveys for this report took place in the late summer and fall of 2025, with one survey date overlapping with a temporary suspension of SNAP benefits for many households due to delays in federal program funding. Neighbors mentioned this in survey results and lauded the food pantry for being a reliable resource and aid in navigating this uncertainty.

Food pantry coordinators and volunteers work hard to run pantry distributions for neighbors. They recognize that the food they share helps families make ends meet. Several pantry coordinators spoke knowledgeably about the limited income opportunities in their towns, noting even more difficulties for people who are elderly, disabled, or lack access to transportation for travel to a job.

Pantry coordinators were aware of federal programs that can support their neighbors, including SNAP, but most agencies did not regularly refer households to complete an application for such programs.

Because of the importance of SNAP in supporting low-income households, CPFB returned to Centre County pantries in April and May 2026 to share information with pantry visitors and encourage applications from likely-eligible participants.

"EVERYONE WAS BEYOND KIND AND COMPASSIONATE. A YEAR AGO WE COULDN'T HAVE FATHOMED NEEDING TO USE A FOOD PANTRY. THIS IS INCREDIBLY HUMBLING AND ALL YOUR STAFF WAS SO VERY HELPFUL AND WE BOTH NOTED HOW COMFORTABLE THEY MADE US BOTH FEEL. NO SENSE OF SHAME OR GUILT JUST REAL KINDNESS. THANK YOU IMMENSELY!!"

This outreach work tripled the number of SNAP applications completed by the CPFB SNAP team on behalf of Centre County neighbors, which in turn helped stem the tide of decreasing SNAP participation observed elsewhere in Pennsylvania in the first half of 2025, meaningfully demonstrating the impact of outreach.

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 resources as needed.

PARTNER EXPERIENCE AND FOOD SOURCING

The experiences, concerns, and successes of pantry coordinators in Centre County were gathered through a listening session in January 2026, phone interviews, and surveys conducted over the course of early spring 2026. CPFB researchers contacted the coordinator of each Central Pennsylvania Food Bank partner agency in the county; results from the twelve pantries that responded to the survey are summarized below.

Pantry coordinators discussed several examples of success in their programs through the listening sessions, interviews, and surveys.

Across the represented agencies, few are operated by paid staff, and most rely heavily on vigorous volunteer programs to organize and distribute food.

Coordinators noted most of their volunteer base are retirees and expressed interest in developing connections with local high schools and other social clubs to bring in younger volunteers able to help with physical labor at distributions. Skilled volunteers who “know what to do” were highly valued, but many agencies were also seeking new volunteers to fill specialized roles, such as food pickup and delivery drivers.

Overall, pantries reported having more than adequate support from the community, both for volunteers and for donations, although one pantry said that they did not have enough volunteers.

Most pantries in the area offer food once or twice per month. Centre County has a substantial number of agencies using a drive-through model, several of which receive the majority of their products from the CPFB through its “Fresh Express” distribution model. Some drive-through Fresh Expresses supplement this food with other donations or purchased products.

Pantry and site coordinators felt strongly they provide services in a way that best suit their organization’s particular circumstances and offer the most efficient service to neighbors. For some, this meant prioritizing a drive-through distribution. Others were pleased at the success of expanding client choice distributions in an effort to minimize food waste and meet the unique needs of a variety of neighbors.

Pantries across Centre County have faced significant headwinds in the last year due to cuts to the primary federal emergency food support program, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Federal food provided to pantries through TEFAP dropped by 62% between July 2025 to June 2026 compared to July 2024 to June 2025.

Combined with the elimination of Local Food Purchasing Agreement funding, CPFB internal data indicates that the central Pennsylvania charitable food system lost 15% of its total food sourcing from the year prior.

Opportunities for Growth in Centre County Charitable System

Centre County's charitable food system has many strengths, but there are several areas in which the region could improve to further capitalize on those strengths.

Key opportunities for growth include:

- ***expansion of choice pantry offerings***
- ***service availability in the evening or on weekends***
- ***adjustment of pantry policies restricting access to or frequency of service***
- ***reduction in wait times for services***
- ***offering culturally competent, multilingual services***

CHOICE PANTRY AVAILABILITY

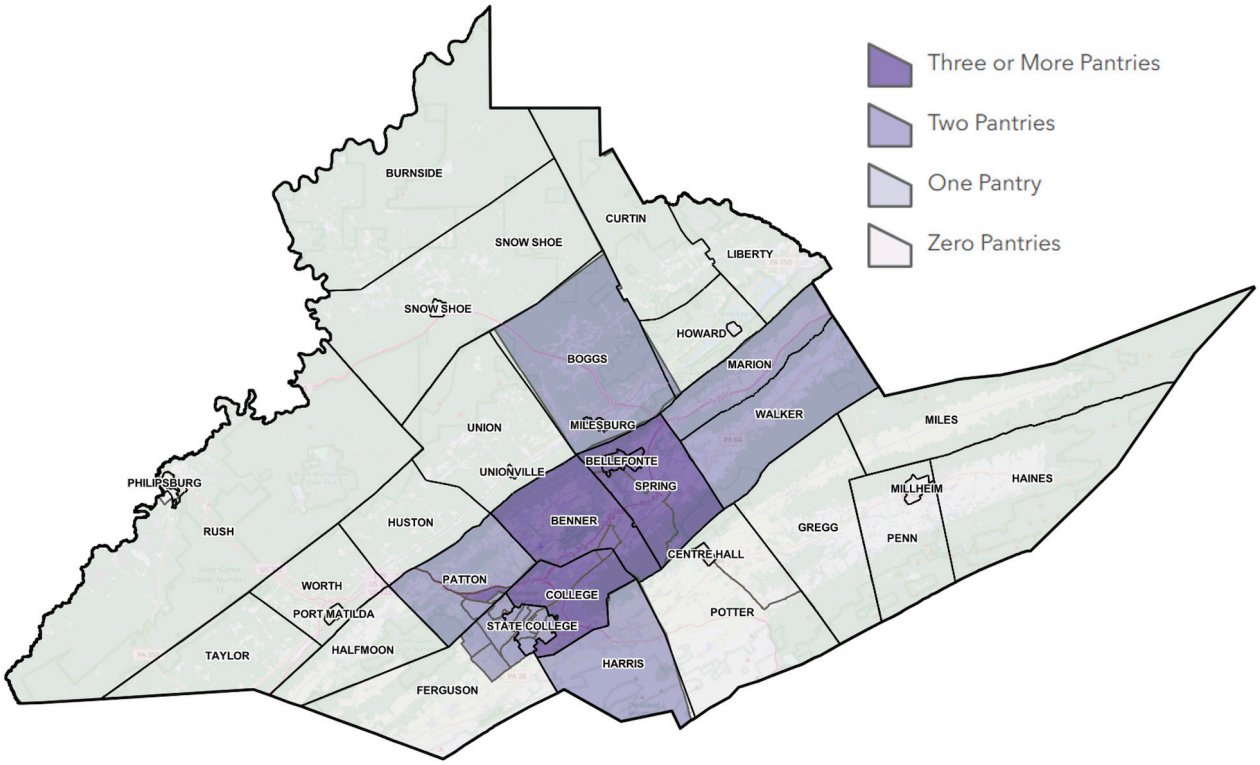
Choice food distribution models, in which visitors may select their own food much as they would at a grocery store, can add dignity and autonomy to the neighbor experience at a food pantry or mobile distribution.

Providing neighbors with greater choice allows them to select the foods that best align with their culture, dietary needs, and health restrictions.

Distributions using choice models have lower reported food waste and a larger proportion of neighbors who say that pantries "often" or "always" have the foods they need, want, and will like, making choice models a more efficient use of pantry resources as well.[14]

Although the below map shows large areas without choice pantry access across Centre County, more than three in four food insecure individuals (78.8%) have access to at least one partner using a choice model that is open at least once per month. This is because choice pantry access is robust in the most populous parts of the county, which cover State College, Bellefonte, and their immediate surroundings. Opportunity for expansion of choice models nevertheless remains in the eastern, northern, and western extremes of the county, including the vicinities of Millheim, Centre Hall, Howard, Snow Shoe, Howard, and Port Matilda.

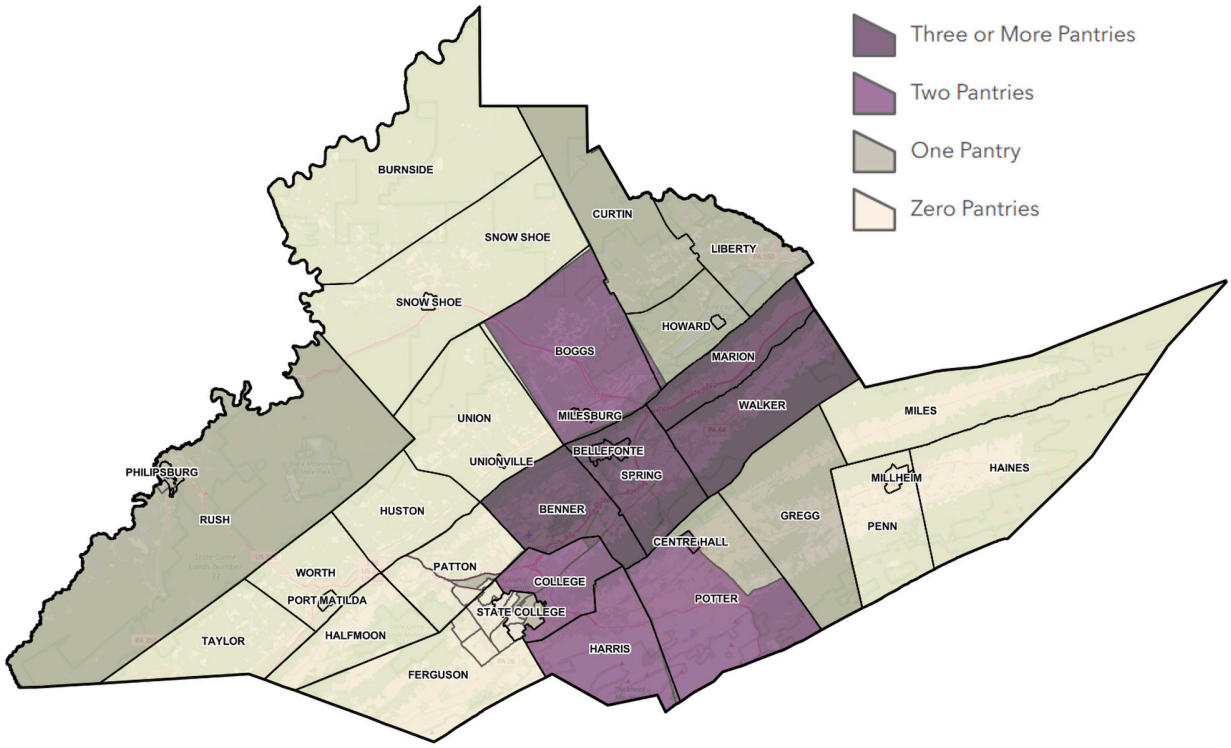
Number of Choice Pantries Within a 15-Minute Drive Time by Census Tract, Centre County



PANTRY HOURS AND DISTRIBUTION DAYS

Offering charitable food services in evenings and over weekends is a vital component of access, especially for households with work, school, or other commitments that may prevent them from visiting a distribution during regular business hours. The following analysis therefore identifies areas within Centre County in which access to evening and weekend pantries is most limited and where, by extension, efforts to expand hours may have the greatest impact on food insecurity.

Number of Evening Distributions within a 15-Minute Drive Time by Census Tract, Centre County



Evening Pantry Distributions

Access to evening food pantries, which for the purposes of this analysis is defined as a distribution with operating hours after 5:30PM, is relatively limited across Centre County.

As shown in the map, geographic access to distributions offering evening hours is strongest in central Centre County, in an area stretching from Benner Township to Marion and Walker townships, with adjacent areas covering Milesburg, Centre Hall, and parts of State College also offering access to one or two evening distributions per month.

Residents of Rush Township and Philipsburg can easily visit one distribution that operates after 5:30PM. The rest of the county, including the Port Matilda, Snow Shoe, and Millheim areas, all lack access to an evening distribution.

Because some census tracts in State College and its immediate vicinity lack an evening distribution within a 15-minute drive time and lack localized food insecurity estimates because of the presence of Penn State University, it is not possible to accurately assess the share of the county's total food insecure residents who can visit a food pantry after 5:30PM with a minimal travel burden. However, even in tracts for which there which there are estimates, fewer than three in five food insecure residents (56.6%) have convenient access to an evening pantry, showing that there is clear opportunity for expansion.

Weekend Food Pantry Distributions

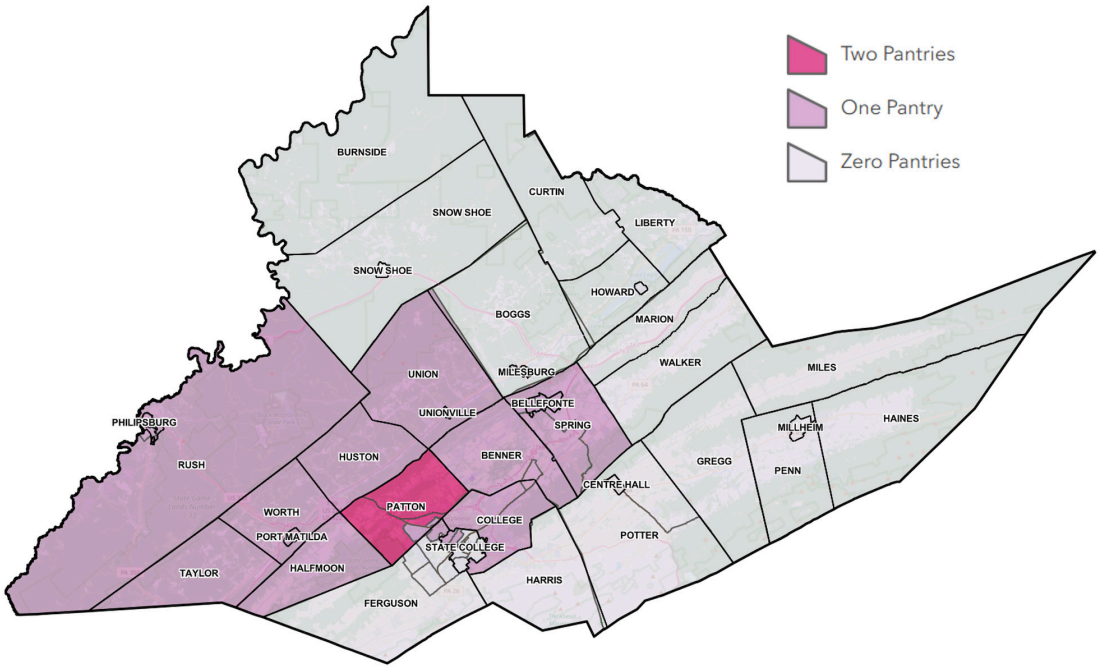
Weekend food pantry access is even more limited than evening pantry access within Centre County.

As shown in the map below, only residents of parts of Patton Township have access to two weekend distributions within a 15-minute drive time.

The area of the county with access to one weekend distribution is larger, stretching from Philipsburg in the west to Bellefonte in the east and including Port Matilda and Unionville as well as parts of State College. The rest of the county, covering almost the entire south, east, and north, in areas like Ferguson Township, Centre Hall, Millheim, Howard, and Snow Shoe, does not have a nearby food distribution offering weekend hours at all.

As with the evening hours analysis, it is not possible to produce an estimate for the share of countywide food insecure population because some of the State College-area census tracts that lack local access to a weekend distribution also do not have localized food insecurity estimates available. With that said, only half of residents of census tracts for which there are estimates (50.8%) can visit a weekend distribution, again showing that there is a major opportunity to expand pantry and mobile hours and days to include weekends across the county.

Number of Weekend Distributions within a 15-Minute Drive Time by Census Tract, Centre County



INTAKE PRACTICES AND COMPLIANCE

Food pantries that are partner agencies of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank receive federally funded products at no cost 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 the neighbors they serve benefit from TEFAP and SFPP by having access to free and nutritious products and/or funding, but the programs come with regulatory requirements by which participant agencies must abide.

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 2026, this threshold is $61,050 for a family of four.[15]

The USDA and Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture set regulations about what forms of proof of address, identity, and income are required.

Currently, 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 request 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.[16]

During primary data collection, some pantries were noted to have restrictive documentation requirements for neighbors in violation of allowable program practices from USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

Though it is never permissible to request birth certificates, proof of income, leases, or Social Security cards, some pantries were seen to be requiring some or all of these as preconditions to TEFAP and/or SFPP services. One pantry was observed requiring a visitor to call his bank in order to verify his monthly income before rendering services. This is not aligned with USDA or PDA regulations, and it is an unacceptable intrusion of privacy from a low-barrier service provider like a food pantry.

Other pantries were observed to be requiring referrals from other organizations to receive TEFAP/SFPP services or to only be serving neighbors who were on a pre-registered list, as though the pantry were an enrolled program. These practices are not compliant with program regulations and increase administrative burden for neighbors and pantry workers alike. Inconsistent adherence to basic guidelines causes confusion among neighbors and arbitrarily creates barriers to what ought to be an easily accessible resource.

Beyond this, some agencies have policies restricting the number of services a household may receive per month and/or discouraging or preventing people from visiting more than one pantry, even if they live within the service areas of two or more. Rules of this kind are often implemented because pantry coordinators believe that they are TEFAP or SFPP program requirements, but this is not the case in Pennsylvania.

Such restrictions mean that even neighbors for whom there are multiple easily accessible pantries likely remain unable to receive more than one pantry service per month.

Given the survey data showing that more than one pantry visit per month reduces very low food security among low income households by 48% relative to similar households that visit quarterly or less, these restrictions clearly limit the positive impact of the charitable food system in Centre County and should be rethought or eliminated.

Beyond this, pantries must make concerted efforts to ensure that their policies and procedures, at both intake and throughout service, promote positive interactions between pantry visitors, staff, and volunteers so all individuals can navigate the process with ease.

No two pantries are alike, which means that neighbors must learn an entirely new set of rules from staff or volunteers who already understand the process fully at each agency they visit.

Pantry workers should give visitors grace around mistakes or misunderstandings. Simple and efficient intake practices make the check-in process smoother for all parties, reducing stress during busy distributions. Such practices are also the most aligned with USDA and PDA program and civil rights regulations, as well as with other rules to which pantries must adhere as CPFB partners.



WAIT TIMES AT PANTRIES IN CENTRE COUNTY

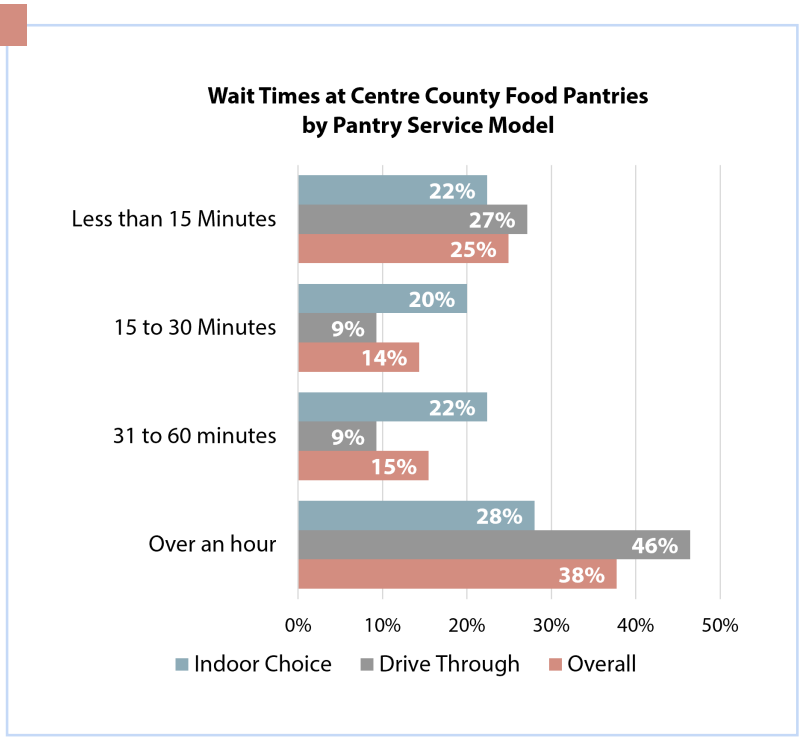
The amount of time a neighbor spends at a pantry from arrival to leaving with food is another component of pantry access. Survey results indicate that the amount of time visitors wait at a food pantry is influenced by the type of service (choice shopping, drive-through) and visitor perception of what kinds and quantities of food will be available during the length of distribution, among other factors.

Two in five neighbors (38%) stated that they wait an hour or more to receive food once they arrive at a distribution. This is a large proportion of neighbors, but similar to results found in neighboring counties with a primarily rural population.

On the other hand, another two in five neighbors surveyed (39%) indicated they wait less than half an hour from the time they arrive until they leave with food.

Neighbors notice and appreciate efficient service, as many of them are visiting their local pantry as one of many errands for a day and may face complications stemming from longer waits or the need to balance transportation plans when carpooling.

Wait times are a result of a complex intersection of how neighbors navigate the process to access charitable food from any given pantry, a decision which includes assessments about travel time, weather, availability of needed food items, and their own willingness and ability or desire to wait (or not) for a distribution.



The pantry's distribution model plays a role; as shown in the chart above, around half of neighbors who visited a drive-through pantry (46%) waited an hour or more for service, compared to under a third of those who visited an indoor choice distribution (28%).

Intake practices likely also play a role, with more complex intake processes taking up more time; eliminating superfluous documentation or referral requirements could therefore help decrease wait times while simultaneously increasing accessibility and aligning pantry practices with USDA, PDA, and CPFB compliance rules.

Across Community Hunger Mapping projects in many central Pennsylvania counties, CPFB researchers have found that neighbors recognize when the food given out by a pantry differs from the start toward the end of the distribution,[17, 18, 19] which incentivizes some neighbors to arrive early in hopes of receiving more desirable food options at the pantry.

For pantries operating a drive-through model, early arrivals and lines require management of the parking lot and public streets filled with waiting vehicles, which create logistical concerns and challenges around the safety of volunteers and any neighbors arriving on foot.

ANCESTRY AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES IN CENTRE COUNTY

Understanding the different communities that live in Centre County and improving culturally competent services are crucial means of ensuring that all food insecure neighbors have access to the food they need and want. Efforts to improve culturally competent services and strengthen culturally preferred food availability are important for two key reasons.

The first is that demographics are changing in Centre County, as they are nationally. Between the 2010 and 2020 decennial Censuses, the Hispanic population of the county grew 53.1%, rising from about 3,600 individuals to around 5,600. In the same time frame, the Asian population rose 43.3%, from just under 8,000 individuals to more than 11,000. The county's Black population grew as well, increasing 19.1% from about 4,500 individuals to more than 5,300. Meanwhile, the non-Hispanic white population shrank 4.3%, though white individuals are still the vast majority (82.0%) of Centre County's total population.

Uniquely among north-central Pennsylvania counties, Asian individuals account for the second largest demographic group at 7.2% of the population, followed by Hispanic individuals at 3.6%, Black individuals at 3.4%, and individuals identifying with two or more races at 3.4%; all other groups combined were less than 1% of the population.

Selected Non-Western European Ancestry Groups in Centre County, 2024 5-Year ACS

Group	Individuals With Ancestry	Foreign-Born Individuals	Percent Foreign-Born
Chinese, Except Taiwanese	4,017	2,941	73%
Indian	1,897	1,247	66%
Mexican	1,749	522	30%
Puerto Rican	1,472	-	-
Korean	1,094	703	64%
Total Sub-Saharan African	918	508	55%
Total Arab	767	265	35%

The second key reason understanding ancestry and culture across the region is important is that, as discussed in Section One of this report, Hispanic and Black households are disproportionately likely to be food insecure. This section intends to assist in the work of improving the charitable food network's cultural competency and culturally preferred food offerings by analyzing U.S. Census and 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.

Analysis based on nationality is important because racial and ethnic groups are not monoliths and culinary preferences differ by nationality. To give the charitable food network some of the information it needs to adjust food pantry offerings and procurement to fit the preferences of the cultures represented in the population, this analysis examines the different national ancestries in Centre County using data from the 2024 5-Year ACS.

The table above shows largest non-Western European ancestry groups residing in Centre County with a population of 600 or more. Puerto Rico is a United States Territory, so Puerto Rican individuals are citizens at birth; therefore, there is no foreign-born data for them. Although no single Sub-Saharan African or Arab nationality meets the 600-individual threshold, they have been included in aggregate because these communities should be included when considering culturally preferred food at pantries.

In Centre County, three of the largest non-western European groups are Asian, and two are Hispanic, aligning with the trends observed in the decennial Census. Chinese (not including Taiwanese) individuals made up by far the largest single non-Western European group as of 2024, with more than 4,000 individuals accounting for 2.5% of countywide population.

The Indian community comes next, at just under 1,900 individuals (1.2% of county population), followed by the Mexican community at about 1,750 residents (1.1% of county population).

No other group made up more than 1% of Centre County's population, though the nearly 1,500 Puerto Rican individuals living in the county combined to come close, at 0.9%. Korean (approx. 1,100 individuals, 0.7% of county population), Sub-Saharan African (approx. 900 individuals, 0.6% of county population) and Arab (approx. 800 individuals, 0.5% of county population) round out the top seven.

It is important to note the role that Penn State University's main campus in University Park plays in Centre County's demographics, as the university's approximately 49,000 students account for slightly below a third (30.8%) of the county's total population.

As of 2025, the demographic breakdown among Penn State's main campus enrollment was 58.9% non-Hispanic white (28,776 individuals), 8.7% Hispanic (4,266 individuals), 7.2% Asian (3,527 individuals), 4.4% Black (2,124 individuals), 6.5% other or unknown (3,161 individuals), and 14.2% international.

Among international students, Asia was by far the most common region of origin (65% of international students; 9.2% of total student enrollment). China (25% of international students; 3.6% of total enrollment) and India (22% of international students; 3.1% of total enrollment) were the most common nations of origin.

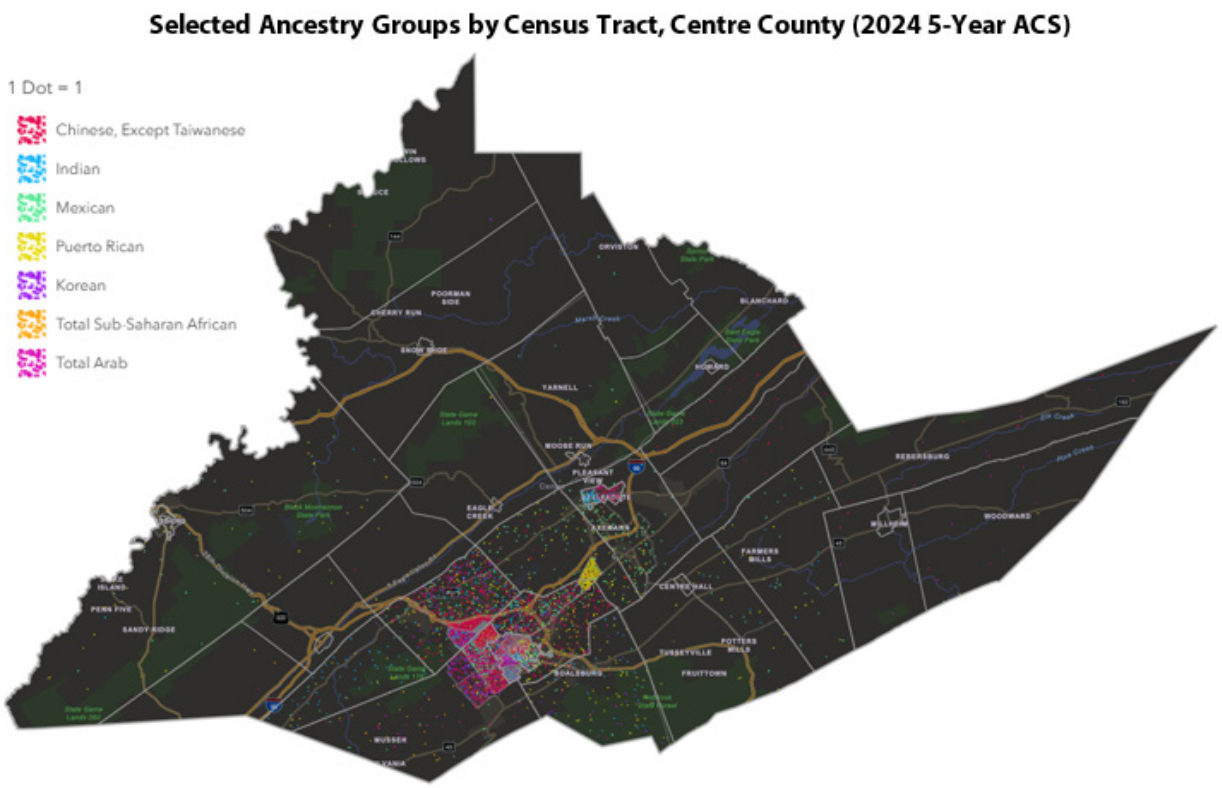
The next most common region of origin was the Middle East (17.5% of international students; 2.5% of total enrollment). Latin America, Europe, Africa and Oceania contributed smaller proportions of international students. In total, more than 130 nationalities hailing from six continents are represented among Penn State's student body.[20]

Geographic Dispersion of Non-Western European Communities in Centre County

As with the population as a whole, different ancestry groups are not evenly distributed across Centre County. This section discusses counties and census tracts in which members of the six largest non-Western European ancestry groups in the region were most likely to reside as of the 2024 5-Year ACS.

The map of Centre County shown below uses a dot density plotting method in which one dot represents one individual living in a census tract. Each color denotes a different ancestry group; this map therefore shows both the relative size and density of each community living in a given area.

As with Centre County's overall population, the bulk of the non-Western European population lives in the State College area, with smaller Chinese, Indian, and Korean communities in Bellefonte; these residents of Bellefonte all account for less than 5% of their respective ancestry groups' total countywide population.



It is important to note that there is one census tract in Centre County that contained two active state penitentiaries as of 2024, SCI – Benner and SCI – Rockview, as it has unique demographic characteristics and stands out on the map as an area with a large non-Western European population that is outside State College or Bellefonte. This tract falls primarily in Benner Township, with a small extension into northern College Township. Based on 2024 5-Year ACS data regarding individuals who lived in 'group quarters,' this census tract contained just under 3,800 individuals, or about 2.4% of the county's total population. 100% of the population of this tract was incarcerated.

As shown in the inset below, State College in particular is highly diverse, with large numbers of people with roots from around the globe living throughout the borough. More than a third of Centre County's Chinese community lives in the borough, as does around three-fifths of the Indian population and a little under half of the Mexican population.State College is also home to about two in five Puerto Rican residents of Centre County, three in five Korean residents, half of Sub-Saharan African residents, and three in ten Arab residents.

State College itself makes up about a quarter of the county's overall population (25.9%), with around 41,000 total residents; when taken together with previous findings, this indicates that non-Western European individuals are more likely to live in the borough than other parts of the county.

Parts of surrounding townships have substantial non-Western European communities as well, mostly in census tracts immediately adjacent to State College. In the northwest, Patton Township has the second largest Chinese community in Centre County, with just over a quarter of the county's total Chinese population, many of whom live near the university. Large shares of the county's Indian, Mexican, and Arab populations live in this area as well. About 10% of Centre County's total population lives in Patton Township.

To the southwest, Ferguson Township has Centre County's third largest Chinese community, accounting for about a quarter of residents with Chinese ancestry, and its largest Arab population (40% of the total). Additionally, one in five Korean individuals and one in five of the county's Sub-Saharan African community lives in Ferguson.

Selected Ancestry Groups by Census Tract, State College Area (2024 5-Year ACS)



Inset: State College Borough, Ferguson Township, Patton Township, and College Township

Ferguson Township is the second most populous municipality in Centre County; it is home to 12.0% of the population. This further shows how State College is a regional hub for non-Western communities as well as all residents of the county.

Turning to the northeast, approximately one in ten Chinese, Mexican or Puerto Rican residents of Centre County lives in College Township. These communities are again primarily clustered in the parts of the township nearest to State College and Penn State University. College Township makes up 6.6% of the county's population.

Language Access at Pantries

In other counties where Community Hunger Mapping has been completed, it is often possible to show via survey results that neighbors who do not primarily speak English have a more difficult time accessing charitable food and experience judgment at higher rates, but sample sizes did not permit this type of analysis for Centre County.

Nevertheless, surveys were administered in a variety of languages, including English, Spanish, and Mandarin, with English surveys including results from neighbors who were English language learners. Responses to questions regarding if a neighbor strongly identified with a country or culture outside the United States included fifteen different nationalities from around the world, with Latin America, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia all being represented.

Of the pantries visited for surveys, only one had a Spanish-speaking, bilingual staff person or volunteer present during the food distribution.

Other conversations with pantry coordinators revealed that few organizations felt fully prepared to effectively serve most non-English speakers at pantries across the area.

As with paperwork for intake and required government forms, simple and straightforward processes are easier to convey across a language barrier for both volunteers and pantry visitors.

Language accessibility is a crucial aspect of culturally competent services and combines well with investments in varied food offerings that meet the needs of their community.

Along with utilizing translated forms that are readily available, pantries can create multilingual and/or symbolic signage or consider partnerships with and volunteer recruitment initiatives through local colleges, churches, or other cultural, civic, and linguistic organizations.

Charitable Food Access Main Findings and Recommendations

SECTION 2 FINDING 1:

Centre County's charitable food network reduces hunger significantly among pantry visitors.

This means that pantries' work to alleviate food insecurity is impactful and makes a real difference in the lives of those it serves. Households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty line who visited pantries more than twelve times in the prior year had a very low food security rate of 22%, compared to 31% among those who visited between five and twelve times and 42% among those who visited one to four times.

Recommendation:
This finding highlights the strong positive impact the charitable food system has in Centre County and shows ways the network can maximize its impact. Because food pantries' power to reduce hunger is larger for those who visit more frequently, these findings indicate that pantries take steps to reduce barriers to access as much as possible.

Such barriers may include but are not limited to administrative barriers like onerous documentation or referral requirements, strict service territories, and visit frequency restrictions. If it is to maximize its impact, the Centre County charitable food system should focus on ensuring pantries are accessible and welcoming to all and that all neighbors can receive at least two food services per month, regardless of if that is at the same location or across multiple pantries.

SECTION 2 FINDING 2:

Two thirds (64%) of Centre County survey respondents said they "always" or "often" get foods they need or want when they visit food pantries.

Three in five neighbors listed at least one item they could not always find at the food pantry. The most commonly requested items were staples like meat, produce, bread, eggs, cheese, and milk. Meat and produce were by far the most desired items.

Recommendation:
Centre County food pantries largely provide the foods neighbors need and want, although there is still some room for improvement. This represents an opportunity to further build on this strength by offering more staples and highly requested items, as well as assessing opportunities to provide culturally preferred items.

SECTION 2 FINDING 3:

All residents of Centre County have access to at least one food pantry within a 15-minute drive time, and more than 95% of food insecure neighbors in the county have access to two or more pantries.

Geographic access to pantries is strong in the State College and Bellefonte areas and becomes progressively weaker in more rural areas of the county, with the Penns Valley area and western Ferguson Township having only one accessible pantry each. Comparing access gaps to the size of local food insecure populations shows that the Millheim area has the greatest need for more access, as more than 70% of the food insecure individuals who have only one local pantry live in this area.

Recommendation:
Geographic access to food pantries is strong in Centre County, but opportunities to expand access remain. The Penns Valley area in the east of the county may need additional charitable food access points, which may come in the form of a traditional pantry or mobile distribution depending on the specific needs and preferences of residents.

SECTION 2 FINDING 4:

Pantry coordinators reported strong community support for their organization's mission and work.

Despite this, pantries face serious headwinds when it comes to federal support for charitable food. Between July 2025 and June 2026, USDA food assistance dropped 62% compared to the prior year. Agencies in Centre County also depend on state programs like the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS). These programs saw significant increases in the same time frame, but the increases still only offset the federal drops in assistance by a third.

Recommendation:
At the federal government level, it is essential that programs like TEFAP entitlement and TEFAP Bonus continue to be supported and ideally increased substantially. These programs have been cut, while charitable food demand has continued to increase and other federal supports like SNAP have faced cuts that have driven even more people to the charitable food system.[21] Other new federal programs like the Local Farmers Feeding Our Communities Act would go a long way to ensuring pantries have enough food to serve the community.

At the state level, it is critical that SFPP and PASS are adequately funded. These two programs are major components of many pantries' food budgets and increases in support would result in fewer people going hungry. The charitable food system is effective at reducing hunger at the local level, but pantries need to be adequately funded and have sufficient product to share with their neighbors.

SECTION 2 FINDING 5:

Access to choice distributions is relatively limited across the county, as many pantries offer drive-through services instead of using indoor choice models.

Just 78% of food insecure individuals have access to a choice distribution in a 15-minute drive, as only four of fifteen total pantry locations offered a choice model in their distributions. As with overall geographic access, choice pantries are the most prevalent in State College, Bellefonte, and their immediate surroundings.

Recommendation:
Pantry partners in Centre County could consider how they might incorporate choice into their existing distributions. While drive-through pantries are preferred by some households, there are ways to introduce elements of choice regardless of distribution type. Any progress towards incorporating more choice will help improve the neighbor experience and simultaneously reduce food waste. One in eleven (9%) pantry visitors at choice pantries reported being unable to use 10% or more of the food they got from the pantry compared to one in five (18%) visitors to drive-throughs.

SECTION 2 FINDING 6:

Access to evening and weekend distributions are very limited in areas of Centre County outside the immediate vicinity of State College.

Only three in five (57%) food insecure individuals in census tracts for which local food insecurity estimates are available have access to a pantry with evening hours. Just over half (51%) have access to a weekend pantry. Outlying parts of the county, including the Snow Shoe, Millheim, and Port Matilda areas, are the places that could see the most improvements to access from hours and days expansions, but even parts of State College have few or no off-hours distributions within a short drive time, showing the degree to which these constraints affect the county at large.

Recommendation:
Existing pantries throughout Centre County should consider modifying their hours or adding another distribution that takes place after 5:30PM or during the weekends. Any new partners in the area should include evening or weekend distributions on a consistent basis. Large stretches of the county lack both evening and weekend access; these areas, which lie mainly in the north and east, should be prioritized, but there is room for growth countywide.

SECTION 2 FINDING 7:

Food pantries are most effective at reducing hunger by being the lowest barrier social service providers available to people when they need help. However, many pantries across Centre County have intake policies and requirements that challenge the low-barrier status of food pantries, are not compliant with USDA or PDA regulations, and represent major intrusions of privacy.

Centre County has reported judgment rates of 3.0%, meaning that the vast majority of people have positive pantry interactions, but intake practices remain the primary challenge in relation to neighbor experience. In addition to being non-compliant, these policies, which include strict pre-registration rules or requiring that neighbors provide proof of income, Social Security cards, leases, or referrals from another agency prior to service, create barriers that discourage or prevent people from accessing food assistance.

Beyond this, some agencies have policies discouraging or barring people from visiting more than one pantry or receiving more than one service per month, even if they reside within the service territories of two or more agencies. Receiving at least two food pantry services per month nearly halves hunger in Centre County, so these restrictions curtail the impact of the charitable food system.

Recommendation:
Centre County food pantries should utilize simple and efficient intake practices in order to remain in compliance with federal and state regulations and maintain the charitable food network's status as a low-barrier source of help for neighbors. The only allowable requirement of an intake process is the completion of a self-declaration of need form or equivalent digital intake. Photo ID may be requested for ease of data entry but may not be required as a condition of service. Neighbors should not be required to obtain a referral from another agency or be on a pre-registered list as a condition of service.

Pantry practices and policies should be welcoming to all neighbors. Staff and volunteers should be understanding that all pantries have different rules and practices and have grace for neighbors if they make a mistake. Positive neighbor experiences at pantries are vital means of ensuring that people feel comfortable seeking help when they need it.

While there may be multiple pantries in a town or area, residents of these areas are generally unable to receive services from all of them under the current formal or informal policies. Service territory and visit restrictions limit the positive impact of the charitable food network and should be re-evaluated immediately in order to provide households seeking assistance with meaningful access to services.

SECTION 2 FINDING 8:

Two in five (38%) surveyed households indicated that they usually wait more than an hour to get food from their local food pantry.

This rate is higher than those observed in other counties for which Community Hunger Mapping has been completed. Wait times vary by pantry type; one in three people who visit choice pantries (28%) wait for more than an hour compared to half of visitors to drive-through locations (46%). Drive-throughs also had a slightly higher proportion of households who waited less than fifteen minutes, at 27% compared to 22% of visitors at choice pantries.

At drive-through pantries, early arrivals and lines necessitate management of the parking lot and public streets filled with waiting vehicle as well as create logistical concerns and challenges around the safety of volunteers and any neighbors arriving on foot. Regardless of distribution model, early arrivals may reflect anxiety around accessing the highest quality and largest quantity of available foods at a pantry. Neighbors often report fearing receiving less or less desirable food if they are not among the first in line.

Recommendation:
Pantries can experiment with several ways to shorten lines and wait times for pantry visitors. Expanding pantry hours, increasing the number of days per week or month a pantry is open, and/or coordinating distribution schedules across pantries can spread demand over time.

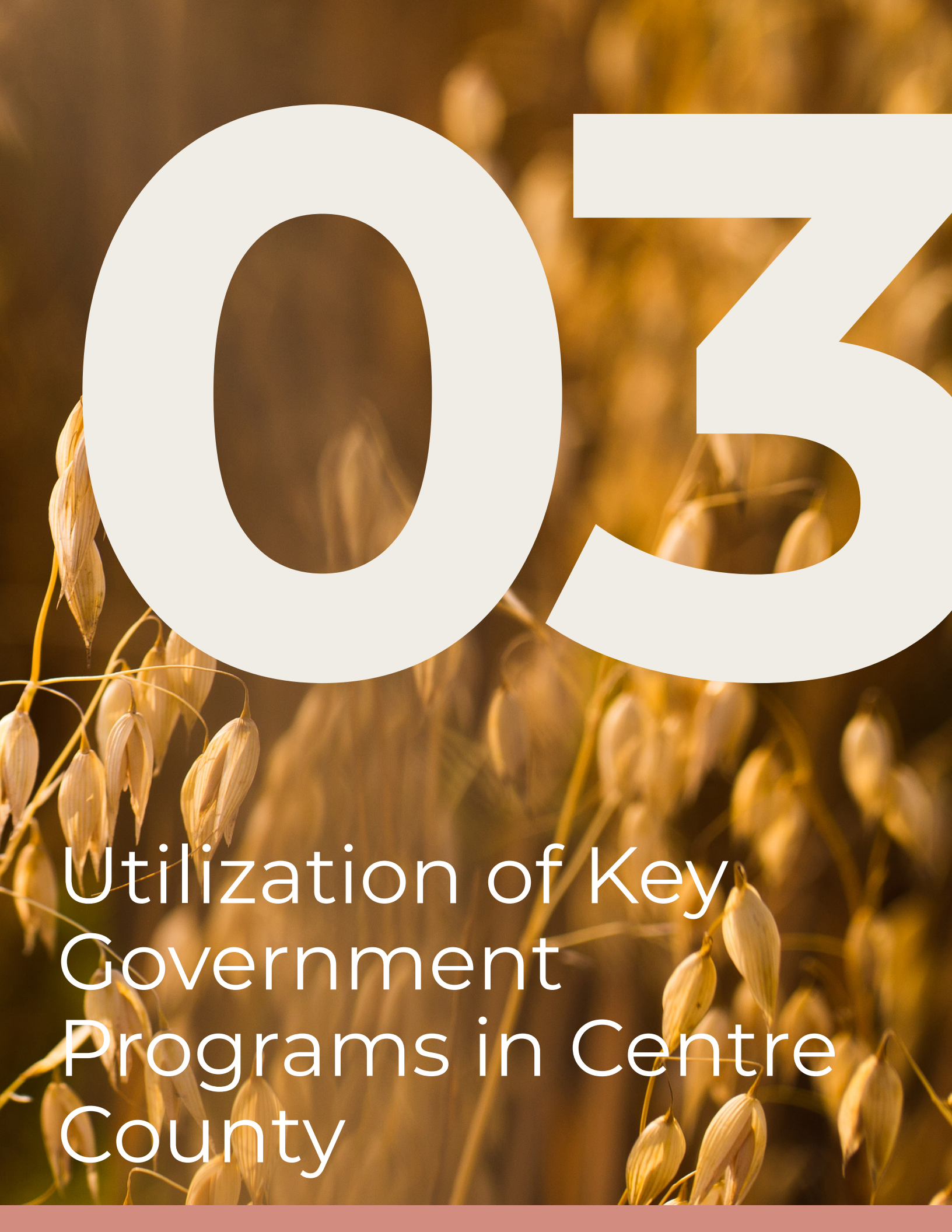
Pantries should also simplify intake processes as much as possible. Streamlined intake can cut waits by reducing the time spent on paperwork and simultaneously improve TEFAP and SFPP compliance.

One of the most impactful options to reduce long wait times and the formation of lines is to ensure that food quality and quantity is the same from the start to the end of a distribution. Appointments or reservations could be a useful tool for reducing wait times, though flexibility for people to walk in without having planned in advance should be maintained. Pantries in other counties have used appointments as a way to help neighbors receive services in a more condensed timeframe.

Incorporating choice may be another way to help reduce wait times, as choice pantries have consistently lower wait times than drive-through pantries, although this depends on the location and on the type of choice pantry and drive-through model.



Section Three



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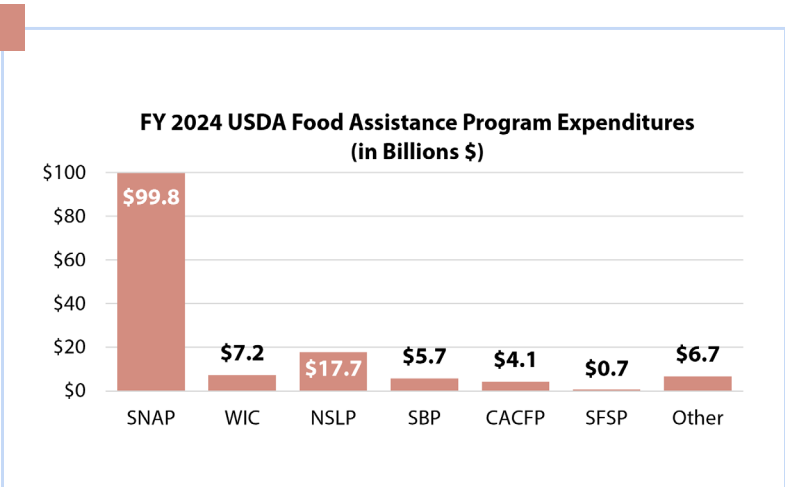
Utilization of Key Government Programs in Centre County

Section Three

Utilization of Key Government Programs in Centre County

The charitable food network is just one part of a set of nutrition programs meant to reduce food insecurity across the United States. Major government programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provide far more meals to families in need than the charitable food system does. In fact, for every meal the charitable food system shares with neighbors, SNAP provides nine. [22] The figure below shows program expenditures for the six largest federal food assistance programs, plus aggregated totals for all other programs.

As of Fiscal Year 2024, SNAP alone accounted for 70% of total federal food assistance spending at almost $100 billion,[23] making it by far the nation's largest and most important nutrition assistance program.



As a result of the budget reconciliation bill passed in July 2025, also known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act or OBBBA, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that SNAP will shrink in size due to eligibility cuts at the federal level along with significant new cost-shares to states that may force some to cut benefits further or even discontinue participation in the program. These impacts began in Fiscal Year 2026 with increased work requirements, continue in Fiscal Year 2027 with an increased state administrative cost share, and balloon in Fiscal Year 2028 with states needing to pay for part of the costs of SNAP benefits – up to 15% of all benefits – for the first time in the history of the SNAP program.[24] The negative ramifications of these changes on access to SNAP will be felt long into the future but are already being widely felt; SNAP participation in central Pennsylvania decreased by 10.9% between April 2025 and 2026.[25]

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the next largest nutrition assistance program at about $18 billion in FY24, while the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) rounds out the top three in federal expenditures on permanent nutrition programs at a hair over $7 billion. Other smaller, federally funded nutrition programs include but are not limited to 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), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

TEFAP in particular is vital for the charitable food network, but total pounds distributed to neighbors via the CPFB's network of agencies with the support of that program were cut by 62% year over year in the fiscal year ending June 2026 compared to June 2025, according to food bank internal data.

Many pantry visitors and food insecure individuals perceive government programs as difficult to navigate. Paperwork may be very time-consuming, and necessary documentation can 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.

These programs remain a critical source of food access and reduce experiences of hunger when individuals participate in them.

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, including SNAP, WIC, the school-based meal programs, and the summer meal programs.

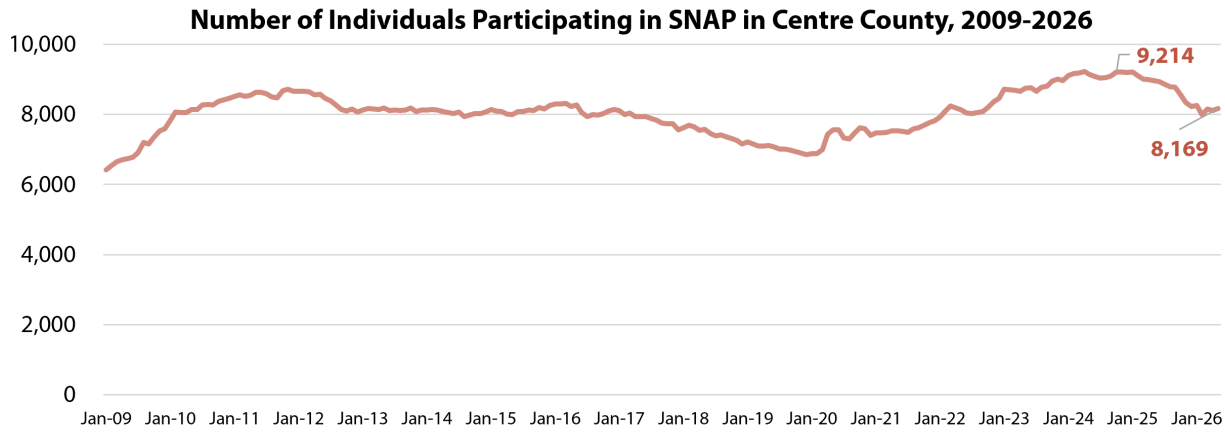
SNAP Participation

SNAP is the largest and most important nutrition assistance program in the United States; many research studies have shown SNAP reduces very low food security by large margins.[26] Because SNAP works like cash, recipients are free to choose items that meet their dietary needs and preferences as well as to budget their own spending over time.

SNAP thus promotes dignity and autonomy, making it a well-designed program.

Eligibility is determined by household size and income, with benefits available on an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card which can be used to buy fresh and frozen foods at many grocery retailers.

Just over 8,000 people participate in SNAP in Centre County, which is around 5.2% of the county's population. This percentage is the lowest participation level in the state.



This extremely low rate is likely due to the presence of Penn State University, as full-time students are generally ineligible for SNAP unless they qualify for an exemption relating to age, disability, work status, parental/guardian status, or participation in other government programs.[27]

However, SNAP participation as a percentage of Centre County's population is low even after controlling for the Penn State student population, which stands at approximately 48,900 enrollees, including 42,619 undergraduates, as of Fall 2024. Excluding students, the share of Centre County residents who participate in SNAP is 7.5%; this is the sixth lowest rate in the state and well below the statewide average of 13.3% as of May 2026.

Centre County not only has a low percentage of total residents that participate in SNAP, it also has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the state, both including and excluding students.

Including students, Centre has the lowest SNAP participation rate in the state.

Excluding students by looking at family household participation, Centre County has the 12th lowest SNAP participation rate out of 67 counties in the state, ranked 56th overall. In summary, even though students skew SNAP participation rates to be artificially low in Centre County, there is opportunity to increase participation among non-student households that have simpler eligibility requirements than do students.

Between January 2025 and May 2026, Centre County had an 11.3% drop in SNAP participation, with more than 1,000 individuals losing access to SNAP in less than a year and a half. This drop in participation, while precipitous, is slightly smaller than the drop in SNAP participation seen across Pennsylvania, where participation dropped by 13.2% overall in the same time frame.

These drops in SNAP participation largely result from changes to SNAP made in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), passed via budget reconciliation in July 2025.

Policy changes included in OBBBA included increased administrative burdens and expanded work requirements for individuals aged 55 to 64 and for households with children aged 14 or older; the elimination of work-requirement exemptions for veterans, former foster youth, unhoused individuals, and residents of areas with persistent high unemployment; and reductions in eligibility for legally present non-citizens.

In Centre County, SNAP participation hit its low point in February 2026, at just below 8,000 people participating. February 2026 was the month that the expanded work requirements became binding, as they went into full effect in November 2025, and individuals not meeting the requirements are subject to a three-month time limit. Between February 2026 and May 2026, participation rebounded somewhat, increasing by 2.1%.

This increase may be in part due to some people getting back on the program as they learned how to navigate the administrative process around the expanded work requirements.

Nevertheless, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as a whole has seen SNAP participation continue to drop since February 2026, so Centre County's improvement is an outlier.

ZIP CODE-LEVEL SNAP PARTICIPATION GAPS IN CENTRE COUNTY

To determine potential geographic areas of focus for SNAP outreach, this analysis employs 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.

This methodology uses the number of families and individuals below 150% FPL as the eligibility threshold to avoid overestimating participation gaps.

The results of the analysis produce an overestimate of participation rates because it uses income levels 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 and their criteria are shown in the table below.

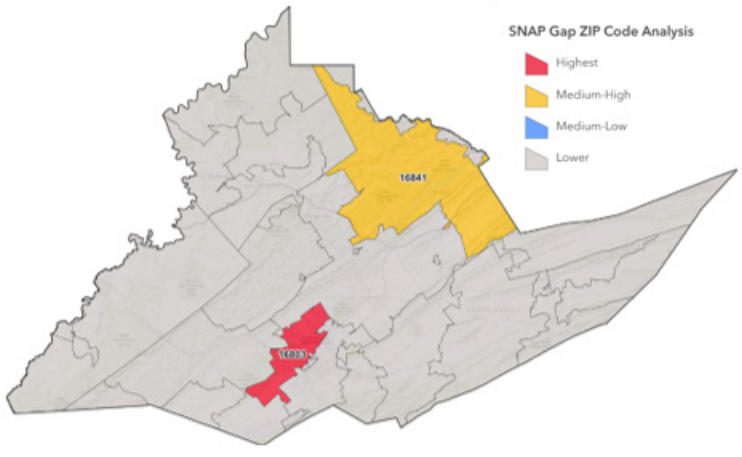
SNAP Outreach ZIP Code Prioritization Category Criteria

Priority Level	Family Participation Gap	Individual Participation Gap	SNAP Participation Rate
Highest	100 or more	500 or more	Less than 75.0%
Medium-High	50 or more	250 or more	Less than 75.0%
Medium-Low	50 or more	250 or more	N/A
Lower	Less than 50	Less than 250	75.0% or More

As shown in the map at left, just two ZIP Codes in Centre County fall into the priority categories listed above.

ZIP Code 16803 in State College is a “highest” priority area, as it has a family SNAP participation rate (excluding college students living without related family) of 48%, with 259 families who are likely eligible for but not participating in SNAP. 16803 also has an individual SNAP participation gap of 6,400 people, but this figure probably includes a sizable number of students who are unlikely to qualify for SNAP.

Centre County SNAP Participation Gaps by ZIP Code and Prioritization Category



ZIP Code 16841 in Howard is classified as a “medium-high” priority ZIP Code. This area has a family SNAP participation rate of 59% and a gap of 97 families as well as an individual SNAP participation rate of 29% and a gap of 917 individuals.

SNAP Participation among Centre County Food Pantry Visitors

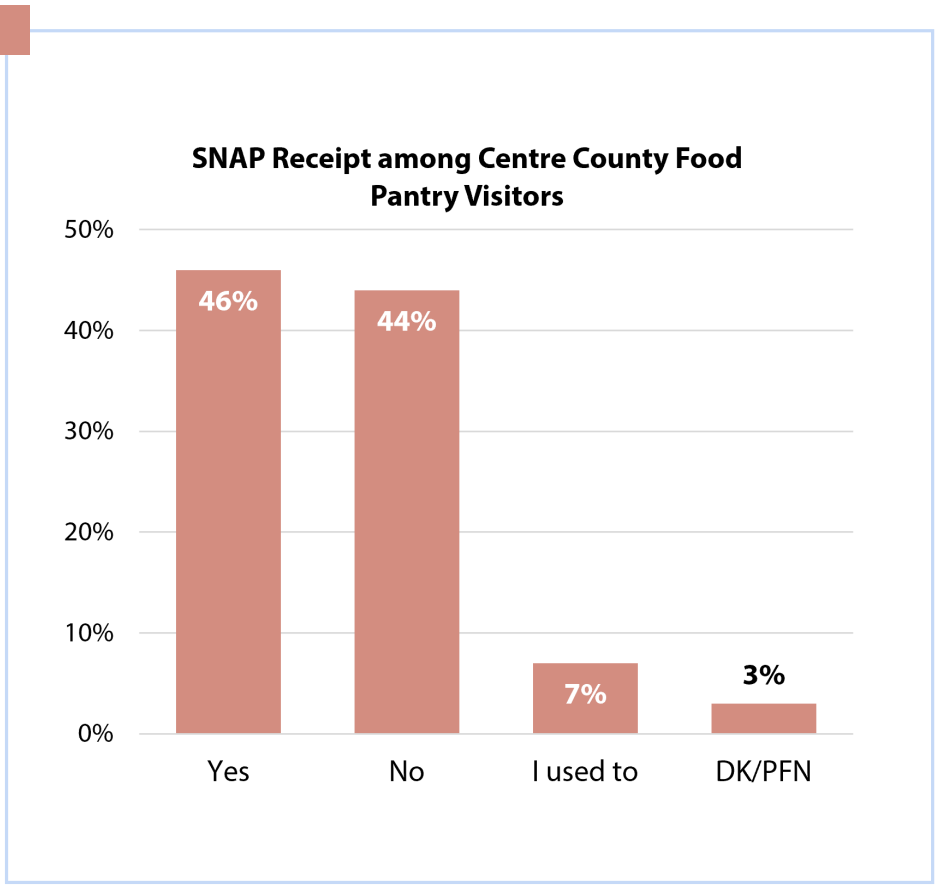
Less than half of all Centre County pantry visitors participates in SNAP as of Fall 2025. This figure has likely dropped significantly in the last year due to the aforementioned drops in SNAP participation in Centre County. These low rates of SNAP participation exist even though 79% of pantry visitors had incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Additionally, 50% of pantry visitors have incomes below 150% of the federal poverty level. At these thresholds, many households could be eligible for SNAP based on income, though this does not account for other factors that may render them ineligible beyond income.

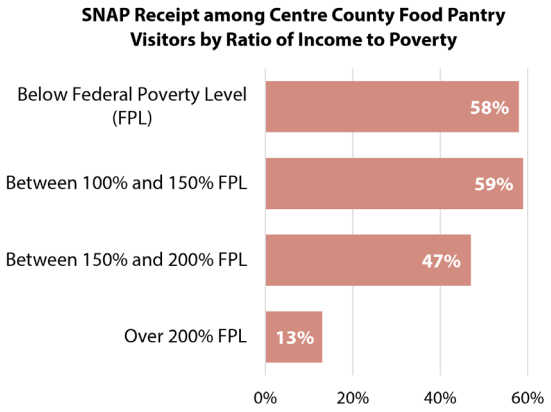
Breaking down SNAP participation by income threshold shows that there is opportunity to raise enrollment among pantry visitors, even for the lowest income households.

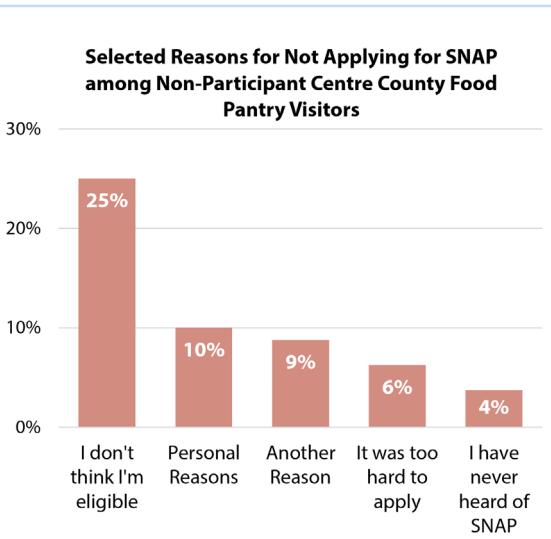
Three in five (58%) pantry visitors with incomes below the poverty level or between one and one and a half times the federal poverty line (59%) participate in SNAP, compared to about half of households with incomes between one and a half and twice the federal poverty line (47%).

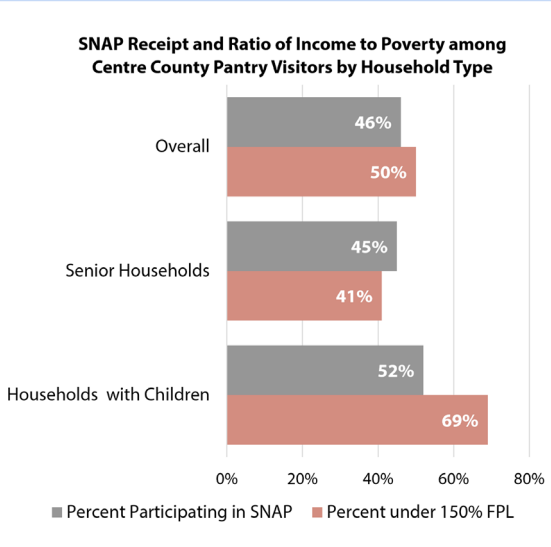
Participation drops precipitously for households with incomes above 200% of the federal poverty line because these households are highly likely to be ineligible for the program.



For the pantry visitors who reported not receiving SNAP and had incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, the most frequent reason cited for not receiving SNAP was "I don't think I'm eligible". Fully a quarter of pantry visitors with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level (25%) and a fifth of pantry visitors below 150% of the federal poverty level (20%) thought they were not eligible for SNAP based on income. This indicates that there is a major information gap around SNAP eligibility and that there may be opportunities for education and outreach that could improve participation, even in the context of ongoing changes to eligibility.







One in ten pantry visitors who did not receive SNAP cited "personal reasons" (10%) and one in eleven pantry visitors said they had "another reason" (9%) when asked why they did not apply for or participate in the program. For households who stated that there was "another reason," answers mostly related to accepting what they had without wanting further assistance.

One person said "Being without food is not constant. A short period of time". Another said they thought they would be taking away from others who needed it more, which is not the case for SNAP, as it is an entitlement program that serves everyone who meets the eligibility requirements. This represents another opportunity for education and outreach that could help increase SNAP participation among Centre County residents.

SNAP participation was higher among Centre County pantry visitor households with children than among other household types. This is largely because households with children reported having lower incomes relative to their household size than other household types, making these households more likely to qualify and to receive larger benefit amounts.

Seven in ten households with children had incomes below 150% of the federal poverty level (70%) compared to two in five senior households (41%). However, the individual SNAP participation rate of children is 52% while it is 45% for seniors.

These relative ratios of participation compared to likely eligibility mean that outreach focused on households with children may be more effective.

Going forward, community efforts to support and retain SNAP participation via outreach and education will be increasingly important, as program changes included in OBBBA significantly increased the administrative burden of applying for and maintaining eligibility to participate in the program.

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 ($61,050 for a family of four in 2026) 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 five.

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.

Pennsylvania is one of the lowest performing states in terms of WIC participation, with an estimated coverage rate of just 41.0% as of calendar year 2021 (the most recent year national data of this kind is available).[29]

This was the 8th lowest participation rate in the United States, ranking Pennsylvania 43rd out of 50 states. As of March 2026, Centre County was ranked 55th out of 67 counties in Pennsylvania for child WIC participation, making it an area of potential opportunity to combat food insecurity across the county, especially given that households with children are among the most likely to face food insecurity among the food pantry visitor population.



ZIP-CODE LEVEL WIC PARTICIPATION GAPS IN CENTRE COUNTY

The following analysis aims to assist program staff and policymakers in targeting WIC outreach geographically as effectively as possible at ZIP Code levels. To estimate WIC participation gaps at a ZIP Code level, this 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 age five in households in combination with incomes at or below 185% of the federal poverty line.

For prioritization purposes, ZIP Codes in Centre County were classified into several distinct categories, highest, medium-high, medium-low, and lowest according to both the participation rate and the size of the participation gap. A brief summary of the criteria can be found in the table below, but the methodology is further explained in a post on the CPFB Policy Blog. [30]

Highest Priority

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

Medium-High Priority

To receive a Medium-High Priority designation, ZIP Codes must have a child WIC participation rate below 62.5% and a participation gap of 250 children or more.

Medium-Low Priority

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.

Low Priority

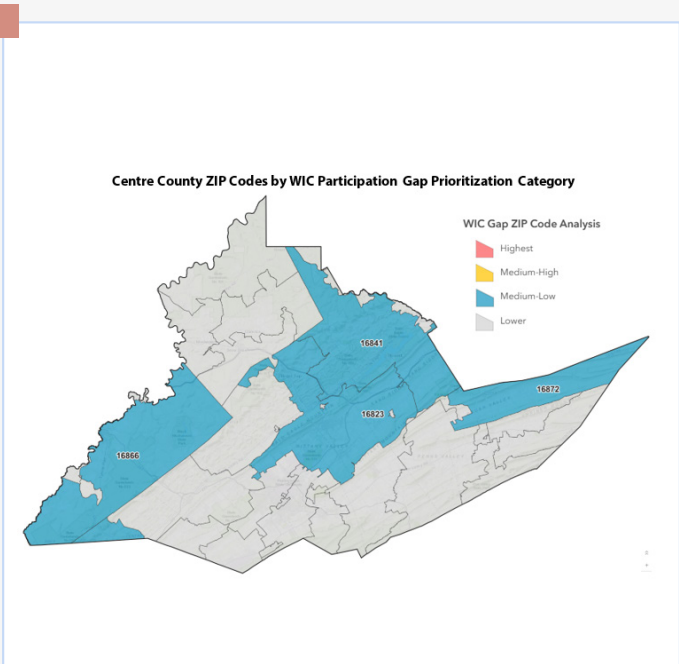
Finally, to be classified as a Low Priority area, ZIP Codes must have a child WIC participation rate below 75% and a participation gap of less than 100 children.

Centre County Priority ZIP Codes for WIC Outreach

Zip Code	PO Name	Child WIC Participation Gap	WIC Participation Rate
16823	Bellefonte	238	40%
16841	Howard	131	18%
16866	Philipsburg	147	39%
16872	Rebersburg	113	3%

As of March 2026, this methodology produced highly accurate targeting information. Targeting outreach towards the 251 ZIP Codes across Pennsylvania identified as Highest, Medium-High, or Medium-Low priority would reach 80.0% of the likely-eligible but non-participant population of children under age five, even though these ZIP Codes contain 44.6% of the entire population of children in this age group.

In Centre County, there are four ZIP codes that are classified as “Medium-Low” priority. These ZIP Codes are 16823 in Bellefonte, 16841 in Howard, 16866 in Philipsburg, and 16872 in Rebersburg. Together, these four ZIP Codes account for most of the child WIC participation gap in Centre County. The locations of these ZIP Codes is shown in the map below, while their respective child WIC participation rates and the magnitude of the child WIC participation gaps are shown in the table at right.



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. [31, 32] The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides free or low-cost meals and snacks to children in daycares and afterschool programs, children in emergency shelters, and disabled adults in day care programs.[33] 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.[34] 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.

REGIONAL AND DISTRICT-LEVEL SCHOOL MEAL PARTICIPATION

As of October 2025, average daily breakfast and lunch participation rates for Centre County's public schools stood at 41.1% and 64.6% 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.

All schools sponsored by a public school food authority with a defined geographic catchment area have been included in this analysis; in some cases, this means that private or alternative schools have been included. Three districts not primarily located in Centre County have been included in this analysis as their catchment areas extend into the county, meaning that they serve Centre County children.

These districts are Tyrone Area School District, based in Blair County; Philipsburg-Osceola School District, based in Clearfield County; and Keystone Central School District, based in Clinton County.

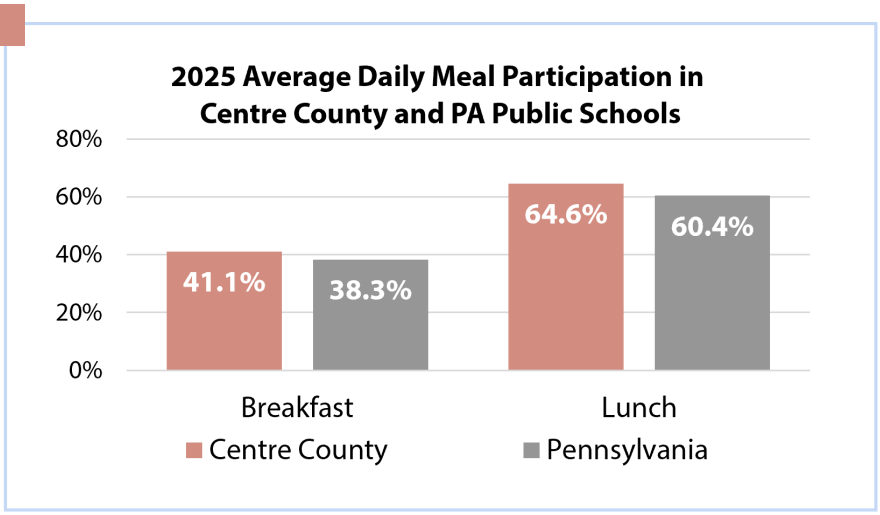
On average, Centre County's schools outperform their peers across the state in both breakfast and lunch participation.

Students enrolled in Centre County public schools were just over 7% more likely to eat breakfast at school than students at comparable schools elsewhere in Pennsylvania, with a 41.1% participation rate compared to 38.3%. For lunch, Centre County's lead was also about 7%, with participation rates of 64.6% compared to the statewide 60.4% rate.

Centre County's slight overperformance in school meal participation indicates both that county schools are taking effective measures to increase uptake and that room for growth remains. More than three quarters (75.6%, or 31 of 41 buildings) of the county's schools offer alternative breakfast models such as grab-and-go breakfast, breakfast after the bell, or breakfast in the classroom, which research has shown to participation.[35]

Only three in ten (29.3%, or 12 of 41 buildings) participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) as of 2025; the provision allows moderate- and high-poverty schools to offer both breakfast and lunch to all students for free if they can prove that at least 25% of enrolled students would qualify for free meals based on their enrollment in other government programs like SNAP, or certain personal statuses, such as homelessness.

While not every school building or district will qualify for CEP, this may still be an option worth exploring for some, though there may be financial barriers to participation even for those who qualify since the reimbursement formula does not make participation viable without additional financial investment until a school or district's identified student percentage reaches 62.5%.



2025 Average Daily School Meal Participation by Centre County School District

School District	Participated in CEP?	Alternative Breakfast Models?	Percent of School-Aged Children (6-17) Under 185% FPL (2024 5-Year ACS)	Breakfast ADP	Lunch ADP
Bald Eagle Area	No	Yes, some schools	26.2%	45.9%	67.8%
Bellefonte Area	No	Yes, some schools	30.5%	31.5%	53.9%
Keystone Central	Yes, all schools	Yes, all schools	36.2%	47.7%	76.8%
Penns Valley Area	No	Yes, some schools	33.8%	37.8%	47.4%
Philipsburg-Osceola	Yes, all schools	Yes, all schools	45.4%	53.6%	74.5%
State College Area	No	Yes, all schools	13.9%	37.2%	62.1%
Tyrone Area	No	Yes, some schools	19.3%	36.3%	62.4%
Countywide	-	-	*27.1%*	*41.1%*	*64.6%*

The table highlights differences in school meal participation among Centre County's school districts by showing each district with above county-average participation rates for a meal service in green, moderate participation rates in yellow, and below-average participation rates in red.

The table includes information about the proportion of children residing in the district who fall below 185% of the federal poverty line, which is the threshold for free lunch eligibility for students who apply using traditional methods, as well as if schools in the district participate in CEP.

The income-eligibility estimates featured in this table come from the 2024 5-Year American Communities Survey, which has data limitations in that school-aged are defined as aged 6-17.

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, attending private or cyber schools, or otherwise not part of the mainstream public school system.

However, these figures are still useful in providing a broad idea of the proportion of free- and reduced-eligible children within a district regardless of identified student percentage (ISP), CEP utilization, or traditional lunch application rates and approvals.

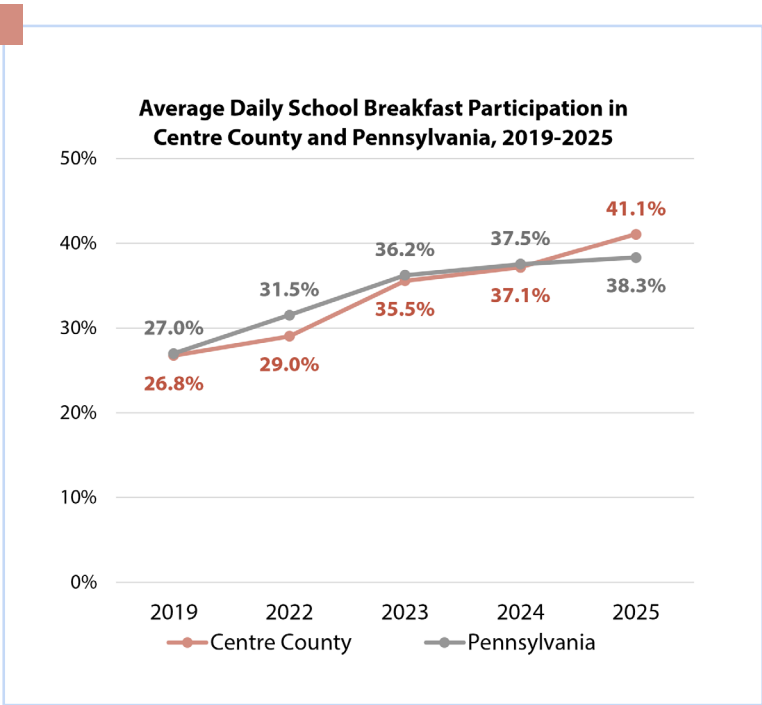
The Impact of Universal School Breakfast in Centre County

Pennsylvania has been providing free breakfast to all students regardless of income at schools participating in the School Breakfast program since the fall of 2022.[36] It has since been expanded by the Shapiro administration to eliminate the reduced-price lunch category as of 2023.[37] Since 2022, universal breakfast has made an immense impact on school breakfast participation in Centre County, as it has across the Commonwealth.

As of October 2025, breakfast participation in Centre County has risen more than fifteen points over 2019, the last year before universal school breakfast was implemented for which comparable data available. This equates to a more than 50% rise in participation.

This growth rate exceeds the statewide average increase of just over 40%.

Notably, breakfast participation has spiked in Centre County more recently than elsewhere in Pennsylvania, although the county and the state have followed remarkably similar paths since 2019.



Between 2024 and 2025 alone, participation rose four points, or more than 10%, and this last year's increase means Centre County now outpaces the state in participation.

This recent spike in Centre County appears to be due at least in part to increased adoption of breakfast in the classroom, the alternative breakfast service model associated with the highest participation rates.[38] Only one school in Centre County offered breakfast in the classroom in 2024, but this rose to five schools in 2025. In the four schools newly adopting breakfast in the classroom, participation increased by an average of sixteen points, or nearly 50%, in just one year. This finding alone demonstrates the efficacy of breakfast in the classroom; beyond this, in the middle and high school that switched, participation doubled, providing evidence that breakfast in the classroom may be a powerful tool in reaching older students, who are broadly less likely to participate than elementary-age children.

While this is tremendous progress, there are still opportunities for Centre County schools to capitalize on their success. The five schools offering breakfast in the classroom account for 16% of the 31 schools that have implemented any alternative service model. Meanwhile, slightly fewer than half (48.1%) of schools offering alternative breakfast service statewide have implemented breakfast in the classroom. Because breakfast is universally free, this is an opportunity districts could potentially pursue even if they are not eligible for CEP.

In addition to rethinking breakfast service model choice, schools might consider joining the Governor's School Breakfast Challenge, which offers recognition to schools that promote breakfast, incorporating more nutritious and local food into the meals, and raise participation,[39] or using other strategies to boost uptake like contests or raffles.

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.[40]

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 usually 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, while only school food authorities can use SSO to provide year-round meal service with minimal administrative barriers.[41]

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 qualified based on area eligibility in 2025 are shown in blue on the map below. Sites may also 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.

This means not every site will necessarily fall into a blue area of the map. For more information about SUN Meal site eligibility, please see the Pennsylvania Department of Education.[42]

The following analysis uses site data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), which administers these programs at the state level. The map uses area eligibility and rural designation data provided by No Kid Hungry, based on USDA eligibility criteria.

There were nine SUN Meal sites in Centre County in 2025. Six were sponsored by the YMCA of Centre County, while Keystone Central School District, Penn State Upward Bound, and State College Area School District each sponsored one. Eight sites operated under SFSP; one site, sponsored by Keystone Central School District, utilized SSO. Eight of the nine sites utilized the rural non-congregate provision and offered both breakfast and lunch; the remaining site, sponsored by Penn State, operated as a camp and offered all three meals.

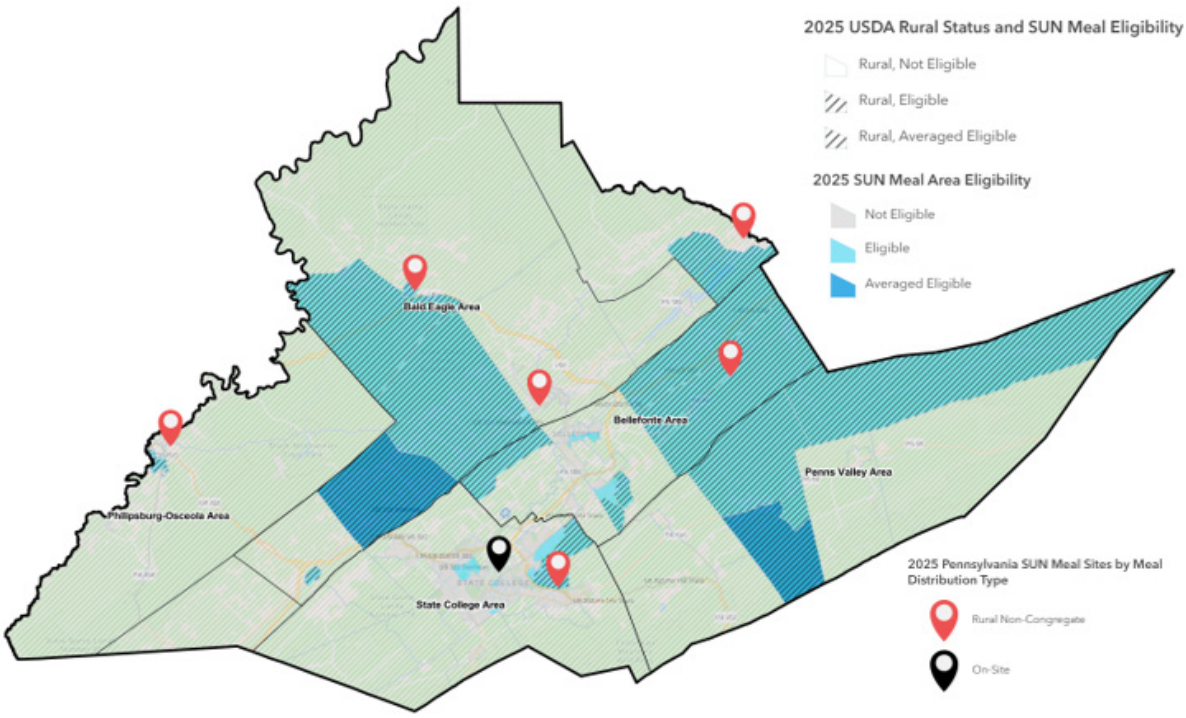
SUN Meal service in Centre County ran for an average of about eight weeks, with most sites beginning services in June and concluding in August, as is traditional for the program.

The Penn State camp site operated for the shortest amount of time – just five days in late July – while most of the Centre County YMCA sites ran for more than ten weeks.

As shown in the map below, SUN Meal sites were fairly widely distributed across Centre County and utilize the rural non-congregate rule to effectively serve locales outside the State College and Bellefonte areas, which are the only parts of the county ineligible for non-congregate service.

Most eligible census tracts within the county had at least one site, and the only school district in the county that had an eligible area in the county but no sites was Penns Valley, as the Centre County portion of Tyrone Area School District was not area eligible as of 2025. Beyond this, there may be opportunities for expansion in parts of Bald Eagle Area School District, particularly in Port Matilda, but on the whole, Centre County's children are vigorously and effectively served by SUN Meals.

Summer 2025 SUN Meal Sites, Area Eligibility, and Rural Eligibility, Centre County





Utilization of Government Programs Main Findings and Recommendations

SECTION 3 FINDING 1:

Centre County has one of the lowest SNAP participation rates in the state, ranked 56th out of 67 counties in Pennsylvania when looking at participation among family households only.

The presence of a huge student population in Centre County complicates efforts to understand SNAP participation gaps at an individual level because they have much more complex eligibility standards that the administrative data cannot assess, but the family-level participation rates show that there are opportunities to increase SNAP participation.

At a ZIP Code level, 16803 in State College and 16841 in Howard have the largest SNAP participation gaps, as measured through family and individual SNAP participation.

Recommendation:
There is a major opportunity to increase SNAP participation in Centre County. Because SNAP is the most important federal nutrition program, stakeholders across a wide variety of sectors should collaborate in SNAP outreach and education efforts. In the first half of 2026, Centre County bucked statewide and national trends of decreasing participation due to the increased administrative hurdles created by the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, as participation increased since February 2026.

This may be due in part to increased community outreach undertaken by CPFB and charitable food partners across the county during that timeframe. While participation is still down 11.3% year over year, Centre County should work to build on these recent successes and increase efforts to conduct SNAP outreach.

SECTION 3 FINDING 2:

Less than half (46%) of pantry visitors in Centre County participate in SNAP, even though four in five households (79%) earn less than 200% of the federal poverty line and half (50%) earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line, which makes them potentially income-eligible for the program.

There is a large opportunity to increase access for households with children, as 69% of households with children have incomes below 150% of the federal poverty line, but only 52% participate. SNAP participation among households with incomes below the poverty level is just 58%, which again shows that gaps in participation even among households who are likely-eligible for substantial benefit amounts.

Recommendation:
Pantries represent well-targeted locations for SNAP outreach in Centre County because they are low-barrier social service providers and places where a considerable number of likely-eligible individuals and families visit. In the context of increased SNAP administrative burdens and requirements, stakeholders should also focus on helping SNAP participants retain and renew their existing SNAP benefits as part of outreach efforts, as it will be a challenge to retain even the current levels of SNAP participation across the county and state.

SECTION 3 FINDING 3:

Centre County has among the lowest WIC participation rates among counties in the state, ranked 55th out of 67 counties.

Four ZIP Codes, including 16823 in Bellefonte, 16841 in Howard, 16866 in Philipsburg, and 16872 in Rebersburg make up a large portion of the WIC participation gap. Participation among pantry visitors is low, at 50% among likely-eligible households.

Recommendation:
There is opportunity to increase WIC participation across Centre County as a whole, but with the largest room for growth falling areas well outside of State College. Mobile WIC units have been successful in other counties and could be a useful strategy in reaching priority areas far from the primary WIC office in Bellefonte.

SECTION 3 FINDING 4:

Centre County's public schools slightly outperform their peers across the Commonwealth in school meal participation, with Centre County students being about 7% more likely than students elsewhere in Pennsylvania to eat breakfast and lunch at school.

This overperformance relates in part to widespread implementation of alternative service breakfast models that have been shown to boost participation.[43]

Recommendation:
Centre County schools have a firm foundation upon which to work to further increase school meal participation and capitalize upon Pennsylvania's universal school breakfast program. Although more than three quarters of county schools (75.6%) offer breakfast via an alternative service model, only one in six of these schools uses breakfast in the classroom, the most effective method.[44] Beyond this, there may be room for Centre County schools to explore participation in the Community Eligibility Program (CEP), which allows high-poverty schools and districts to offer lunch to all students at no cost and with no paperwork burden; as of 2025, only three in ten county schools participated in the program.

SECTION 3 FINDING 5:

As of Summer 2025, there were nine SUN Meal sites offering free meals to children across Centre County during the summer break from school; eight of them offered grab-and go-meals under the non-congregate rural provision.

Sites were relatively evenly distributed across the county, with at least one site in all school districts except Penns Valley and the Centre County portion of Tyrone Area; the latter of these did not have an area-eligible census tract in 2025.

Recommendation:
Centre County is robustly served by SUN Meals, but there is still room for growth, as only one in eight Pennsylvania students who receives free lunch at school also receives SUN Meals as of 2024.[45] The Port Matilda area stands out as one that may have need of a SUN Meal site, and existing sites and sponsors should consider ways to promote the program and further expand both access and participation. Additionally, privately funded summer food programs for children, including backpack, school pantry, mobile distributions, and independently funded meal programs can provide much-needed support in areas that are not eligible to offer SUN Meals or for which the federal programs are not a good fit for the community's needs.



Section Four



04

Intersecting and Upstream Issues

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Intersecting and Upstream Issues

Drivers of Food Insecurity

This section combines extensive secondary data analysis with primary data from food pantry visitor surveys collected at agencies throughout the county to better understand the root causes of food insecurity in Centre County. 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. [46, 47]

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.[48]

This analysis finds several key upstream and intersecting factors contributing to food insecurity across Centre County, including:

- ***low and inconsistent income***
- ***unstable housing***
- ***difficulties with transportation***
- ***lack of access to the financial system***
- ***chronic health conditions***

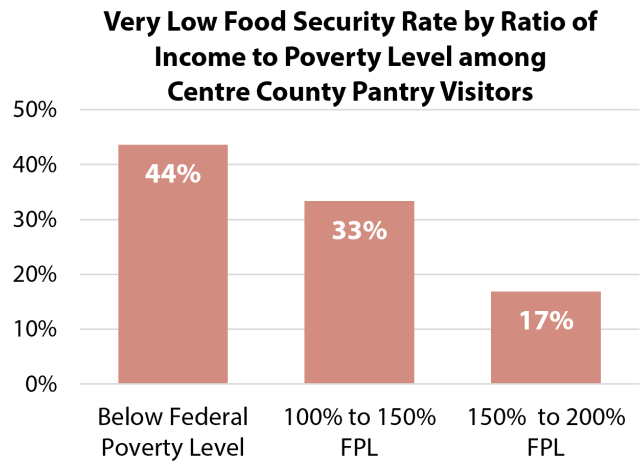


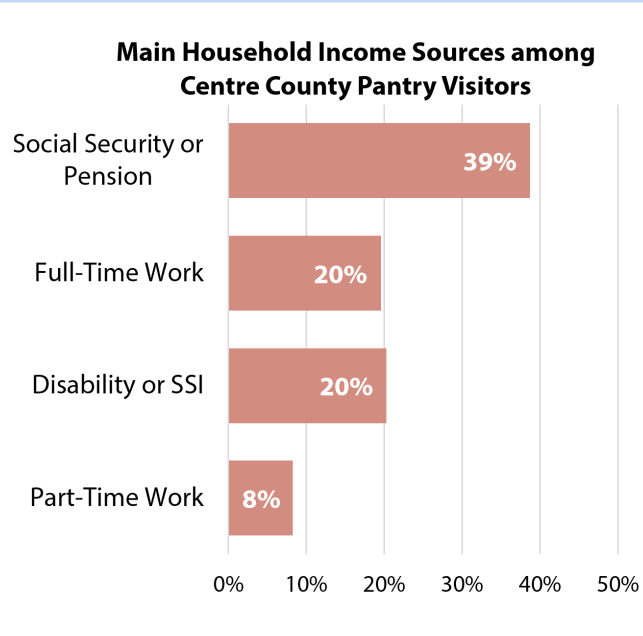
INCOME AND INCOME SOURCES

The strongest predictor of very low food security status nationally is household income. This correlation is visible among Centre County food pantry visitors as well. More than two in five Centre County food pantry visitors (44%) with incomes below 100% of the federal poverty line (FPL) had survey results that placed them in the very low food security category.

The prevalence of very low food security dropped as income rose; a third (33%) of pantry visitors with incomes between 100% and 150% FPL experienced very low food security, and just under one in six (17%) visitors with incomes between 150% and 200% FPL.

The most common income source among Centre County food pantry visitors is Social Security or pension, at two in five (39%). Full-time work and Disability or SSI tie for the second most common source of income at one in five visitors (20%) respectively. One in twelve (8%) pantry visitors relies on part-time work as their primary income. Only one in ten pantry visitors claimed other sources of income, including "none of these" (8%), contract or gig work (1%), or unemployment compensation (1%).





Taken together, these findings show that, contrary to popular stereotypes, unemployment is not the main driver of the need for food assistance. Rather, most pantry visitors who are able to work do so, and challenges around making ends meet on limited or fixed budgets are what bring neighbors to the pantry.

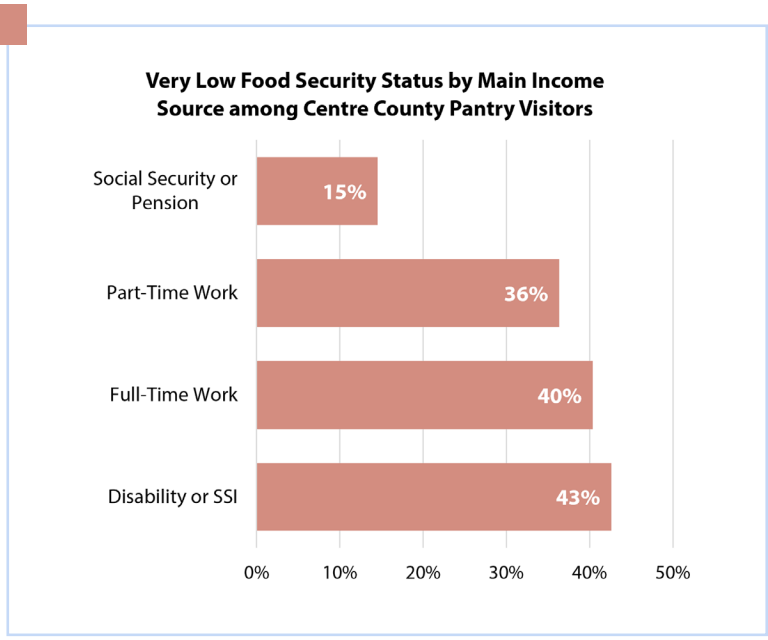
There are substantial differences in primary source of income by household composition. Senior-only households were unsurprisingly most likely to rely on Social Security or a pension as their main income; more than half (52%) did so. The plurality (42%) of households with children reported working full time.

There was considerable variation in very low food security by income source among pantry visitors in Centre County. Households receiving Disability or SSI were the most likely to experience very low food security, at 43%. Full-time and part-time workers were also highly vulnerable to very low food security with rates of 40% and 36%, respectively. Approximately two in five households relying on these three income sources had skipped meals within the last year despite visiting food pantries.

On the other hand, one in six (15%) of households relying on Social Security or pension faced very low food security, reflecting the relative strength of the safety net for seniors.

These findings show that workers in Centre County may be facing issues around low wages, seasonal work, and inconsistent or limited hours that make it difficult for them to make ends meet. Indeed, two in five full-time workers (40%) earned less than $2,000 per month.

One in six full-time workers (17%) fell below the federal poverty line for their household size, and three in five (62%) earned less than 150% FPL.



1/6

full-time workers fell below the federal poverty line for their household size

Though sample sizes were small for part-time workers, the data indicates that over a third of them had incomes below the federal poverty line (36%). Some part-time workers who visit food pantries in Centre County may be students or recent graduates, as one in six (14%) mentioned choosing between food and tuition or student loans, compared to just one in thirty full time workers (3%).

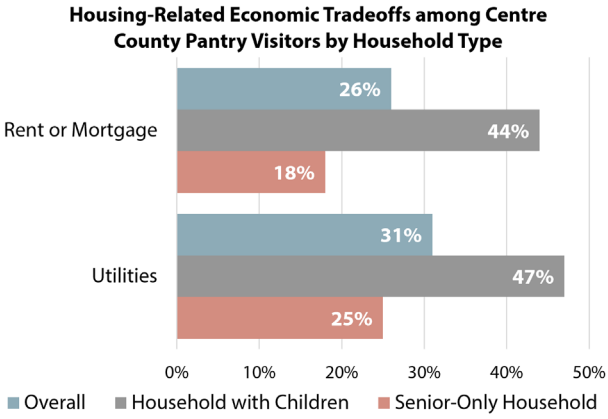
Disabled neighbors likewise face challenges that raise their risk of experiencing very low food insecurity, which may include but are not limited to administrative barriers to applying for and maintaining eligibility for governmental assistance; inadequate benefit amounts upon being approved; the increased costs people with disabilities may have due to their medical needs; and limited ability to work or find an accessible job.



Housing, Utilities, and Evictions

Housing stability is a key pillar of overall economic stability and therefore, of food security. Many neighbors across Centre County expressed concerns about their housing situations and associated costs.

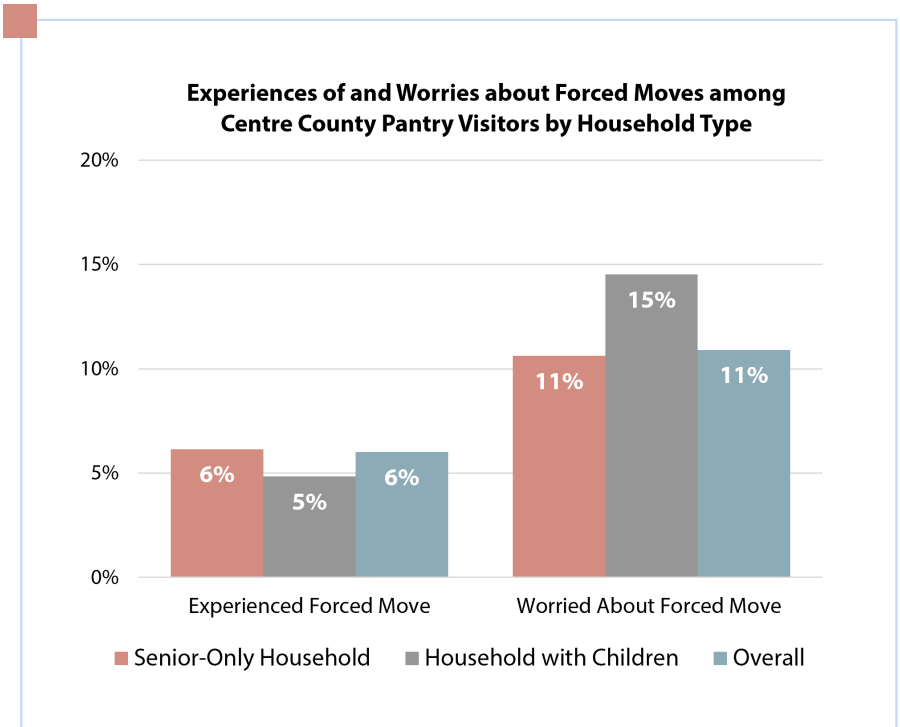
When asked if they had been forced to choose between paying for food and another basic need within the last year, one in three (31%) pantry visitors said they had chosen between utilities and groceries, and one in four (26%) mentioned choosing between their rent or mortgage and food.



Households with children were quite vulnerable to these kinds of tradeoffs; nearly half of these households had made tradeoffs between rent or mortgage (44%) or utilities (47%) and food.

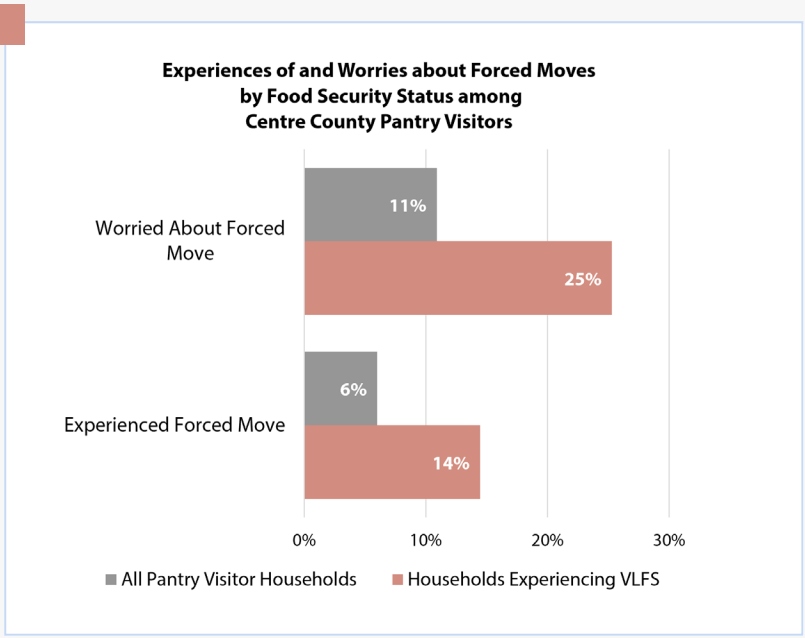
On the other hand, senior-only households were somewhat insulated, with tradeoff rates well below those of the average pantry visitor household. Surveys asked pantry visitors about their experiences with evictions, foreclosures, and other forced move within the last twelve months, as well as if they had worries about being forced to move in the coming year.

Across Centre County, about one in twenty (6%) pantry visitors had been evicted, foreclosed upon, or forced to move within the last year.



Another one in nine (11%) were worried that they would go through one in the next year. One in six households with children (15%) were worried about a forced move, compared to one in nine senior-only households (11%).

There were major disparities in housing security by food security status. Neighbors who reported experiencing very low food security were more than twice as likely than the average pantry visitor to be worried about or have gone through a forced move, with rates of 25% and 14% respectively.



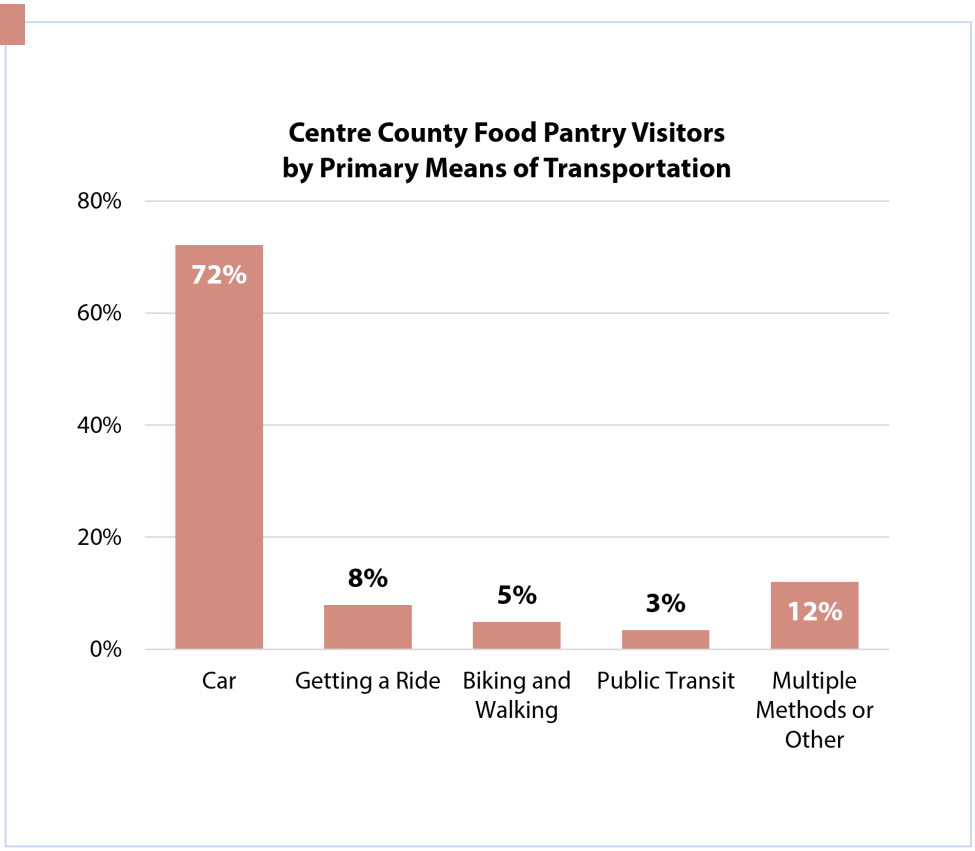
Fully three quarters (75%) of households that had been forced to move in the last year also endured very low food security, as did just below eight in ten (77%) households who were worried about forced moves.

These findings together highlight the tight relationship between housing and food security.

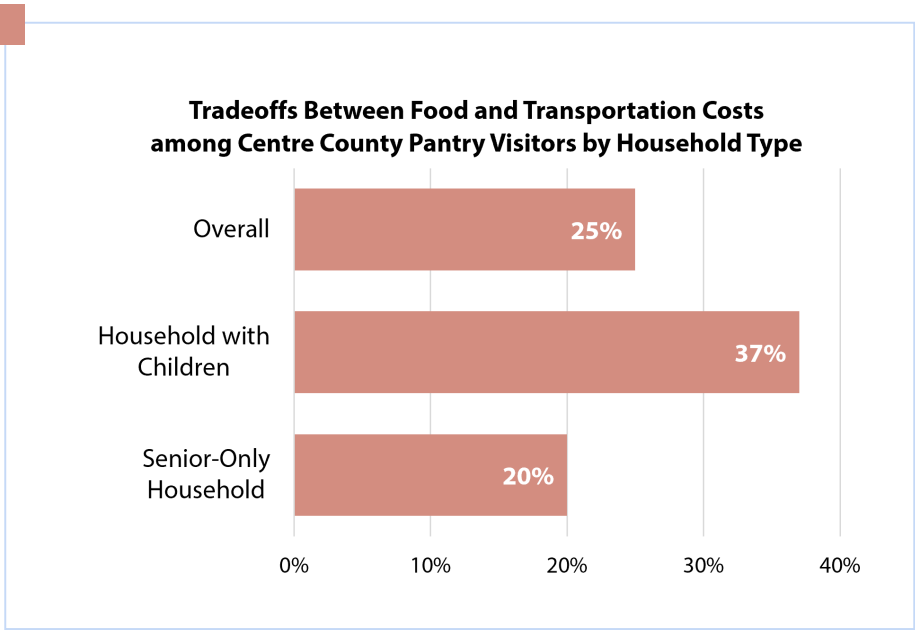
Transportation

Lack of transportation or challenges around transportation affordability can be a barrier to food access, especially in low-income and rural areas. Seven in ten Centre County pantry visitors (72%) use a car as their primary means of transportation.

Slightly more than one in twelve (8%) got rides from family or friends, while one in twenty (5%) biked or walked. Fewer than one in thirty (3%) relied exclusively on public transportation. One in eight (12%) pantry visitors used multiple modes of transportation or relied on other means, like a taxi or rideshare.



Cars are valuable tools and are critical for getting to work, school, appointments, and running errands in suburban or rural areas where public transit infrastructure is limited or nonexistent. Unfortunately, personal vehicles can be quite expensive. The average annual cost of operating a vehicle in Pennsylvania is more than $2,600,[49] not including car loan or lease payments, which averaged to another $7,500 per year nationally for those who had them as of 2025.[50]



This is a substantial cost for any individual or household, but it is a remarkably heavy weight on those with low incomes, including food pantry visitors.

Findings from neighbor surveys align with this hypothesis. A quarter (25%) of Centre County pantry visitors reported having to make tradeoffs between transportation costs, including gas, insurance, car payments, or public transit fares, and food within the last twelve months.

Among households with children, this proportion rose to two in five (37%); seniors were less likely to have to make this choice, at one in five (20%).

Pantry visitors may face other transportation-related challenges to pantry access beyond economic tradeoffs. One in eight (12%) survey respondents across Centre County said they had been prevented from visiting a pantry at some point in the past because they lacked reliable access to a car or public transit, and a similar proportion (13%) mentioned not being able to go to the pantry because they did not have sufficient money for gas or fare.

About one in twenty (6%) faced challenges physically carrying the food they received at the pantry home. There were not serious differences in the prevalence of these challenges between household types.

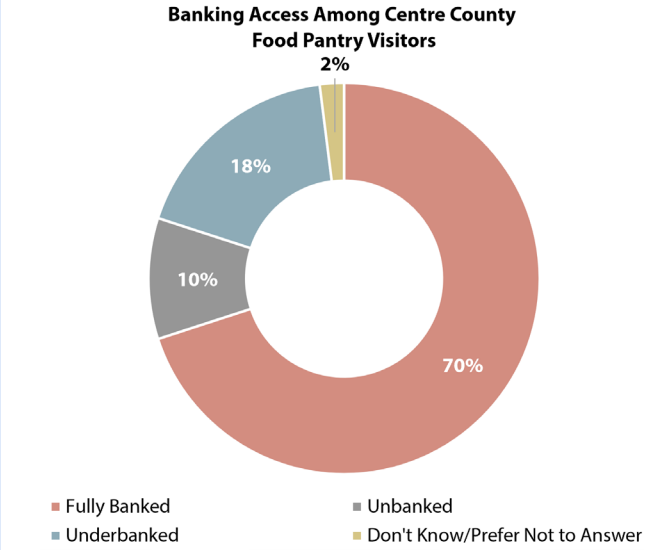
Overall, these findings suggest that a sizable minority of the food pantry visitor population across Centre County experience transportation barriers, even if they have access to a personal vehicle.

To the extent possible, it could be helpful for food pantries to take steps to ensure that those with transportation issues can access charitable food services, including but not limited to the use of proxy services, home delivery, aligning distributions with local bus schedules (if applicable), and other creative solutions.

Financial System Access

About three in ten pantry visitors in Centre County have limited or no access to the traditional financial system. One in ten is unbanked, meaning that they do not have a checking or savings account. Another two in five (18%) are underbanked, meaning that they have a bank account but have used an alternative financial service, such as a check-cashing service, payday lender, or money order, within the last twelve months. In Centre County, survey respondents of color had elevated rates of limited or no financial access; 26% were unbanked, and 20% were underbanked, compared to a 7% unbanked and 18% underbanked rate among non-Hispanic white households.

Relatively high rates of no or limited financial access among pantry visitors and disparities in access by race and ethnicity are a concern because utilization of the mainstream financial system helps connect people to opportunities for economic mobility. Use of the traditional banking system is also linked with greater financial well-being at both the individual and community level.[51] Without access to traditional banking, households are forced to rely on costly alternative financial services, such as check-cashing and payday loans. These services can take up a sizable portion of low-income individuals' take-home pay; unbanked households spend an average of 5% of their income on fees for alternative financial services.[52]



Financial health has an effect 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.[53] Furthermore, 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.[54]

Health Conditions

Households who face food insecurity may be more susceptible to suffering from 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 are reinforcing as health conditions both contribute to and are exacerbated by food insecurity.[55]

In Centre County, 61% of food pantry visitors reported that they or a member of their household had been diagnosed with at least one diet-related health condition, including but not limited to diabetes, high blood pressure, and kidney disease.

High blood pressure was the most frequently mentioned health concern, affecting more than two in five (45%) surveyed households. Diabetes affected a similar share of households (39%). One in six (17%) survey respondent households had a member with heart disease, and one in ten (10%) had a member with kidney disease.

Many treatment plans for diet-related health conditions emphasize the consumption of foods with low amounts of added sugar, saturated and trans fats, and sodium. Highly nutritious, fresh items meeting these criteria are often the foods that food insecure neighbors find most difficult to purchase since they are usually more expensive than less healthy, highly processed options.

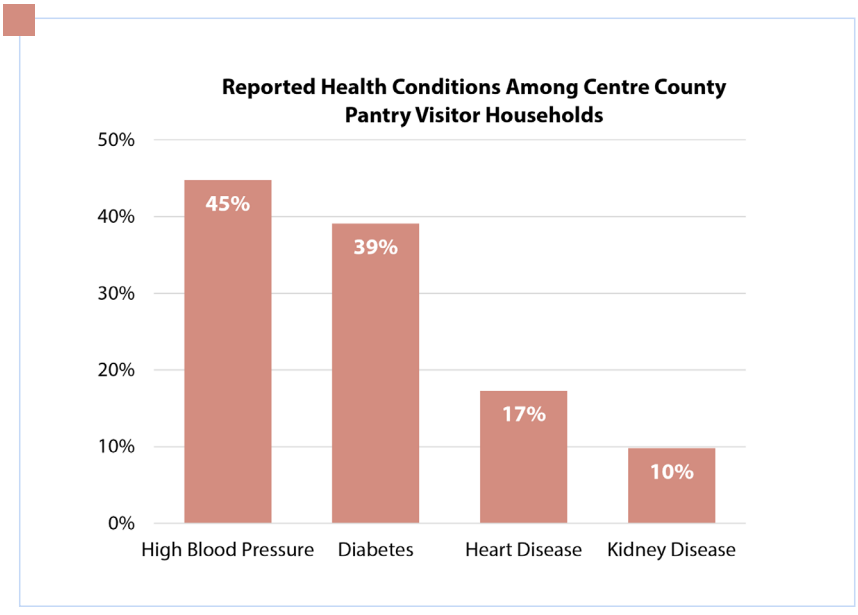
The charitable food system should therefore work to source items that are lower in added sugar, sodium, and saturated and trans fats that can allow visitors to meet their dietary needs, as well as to offer choice pantry models that enable visitors to select the foods that work for them.

This work may present opportunities for pantries to partner with healthcare organizations or other interested stakeholders to implement Food as Medicine programming or other collaborative efforts to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health as well.

For instance, produce offerings are a valuable offering at food pantries and are one way to help address population health aspects of Food as Medicine programming, given the significant reach of the charitable food network.

In Centre County, a large share of pantry visitors expressed that they would like more produce, both in the food preferences section of the survey in which more than two in five reported wanting more produce (the highest of any county in which Community Hunger Mapping has been completed so far) and in discussions with survey enumerators articulated in the notes section of the survey.

Many pantry visitors also expressed appreciation for the current produce offerings of the charitable food system in Centre County.



One pantry visitor shared, “I visited this food pantry for the first time this week and had a very good experience. I felt very welcomed with no judgement from staff or other patrons. The model of shopping like a normal grocery store was perfect. I have many allergies so I need to check items to make sure I can eat/ cook with them.

I loved that there were lots of fresh fruits and vegetables! Before I lost my job, I didn't buy a lot of fresh food because it was out of budget and didn’t last.”

"I HAVE EATEN HEALTHIER IN THE LAST WEEK SINCE I PICKED UP MY FIRST MONTH OF FOOD FROM THE PANTRY THAN I HAVE IN YEARS!”

Intersecting and Upstream Issues Main Findings and Recommendations

SECTION 4 FINDING 1:

Aligning with national data on the topic, low income is the strongest predictor of very low food security among Centre County households.

More than two in five (44%) pantry visitors with incomes below the federal poverty line faced very low food security. Likelihood of experiencing very low food security decreased as income rose – very low food security rates were 33% for households with incomes between one and one and a half times the federal poverty line, and 15% for those with incomes between one and a half and two times the federal poverty level.

Recommendation:
Poverty is one of the strongest determinants of food insecurity. Limited incomes, including low wages, have an immense effect on food pantry visitors and are core drivers of the need for charitable food assistance. The charitable food system should be aware of this and should advocate for policies and programs that support neighbors and can help lift them out of poverty, including a strong social safety net.

SECTION 4 FINDING 2:

Four in five pantry visitors in Centre County stated that their main source of income is either Social Security or pension (39%), full-time work (20%), or SSI or Disability (20%).

This share rises to nearly nine in ten upon the inclusion of part-time work (8%). The most common source of income among working age households with children was full-time work, at two in five (42%); seniors most often said they relied on Social Security or pension (52%).

Recommendation:
Unemployment is not a major contributor to the demand for charitable food in Centre County. Rather, low wages, irregular or seasonal work, and low fixed incomes, as well as other challenges like housing affordability, are the main drivers of food pantry visits. Stakeholders in the charitable food system should use this finding to begin to dispel myths about who visits food pantries and why they are doing so. Pantries should ensure that their hours of operation and other policies accommodate working households and that everyone in need, regardless of their employment status or source of income, can access food assistance.

SECTION 4 FINDING 3:

Two in five (40%) of Centre County pantry visitors who reported full-time work as their primary source of income experienced very low food security, as did similar shares of those who rely on Disability or SSI (43%) or work part time (36%).

The plurality of pantry visitors who said that they work full time (40%) earned less than $2,000 per month which equates to $11.50 per hour or less, and three in five (62%) fell below 150% of the federal poverty line for their household size. Households claiming Social Security or pension as their primary source of income were far less likely to experience very low food security (15%), highlighting the relative strength of the social safety net for seniors.

Recommendation:
Food security and anti-poverty advocates should emphasize the importance of family-sustaining wages and stable, consistent jobs when they communicate with business partner, donors, elected officials, and the public about food insecurity and the root causes thereof. Labor policy changes that could increase the security of work and support neighbors currently facing food insecurity include, but are not limited to, 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.

Households with disabled members are at elevated risk of facing very low food security as well. Policy adjustments that could assist disabled neighbors include increases to the adequacy of SSDI and SSI benefits as well as program reforms that could help recipients live less precariously. Examples include the expansion of tax-exempt savings accounts that are not counted against SSI asset limits (ABLE accounts) and reductions of policies that discourage work beyond a certain income threshold.

SECTION 4 FINDING 4:

Housing and related expenses are highly correlated with food insecurity in Centre County.

Three in ten (31%) pantry visitors reported having chosen between groceries and their utility bills in the last year, and one in four (26%) chose between food and their rent or mortgage. Households with children were highly likely to have had to make these hard choices; almost half chose between groceries and utilities (47%) or rent/mortgage (44%).

Just over one in twenty (6%) pantry visitors had been foreclosed upon, evicted, or otherwise forced to move in the last year, and one in nine (11%) worried about facing a forced move in the coming year. Households who experienced very low food security were more than twice as likely to have suffered a forced move in the last year than the average pantry visitor, at 14%, and were more than twice as likely to worry about a coming forced move at 25%.

Recommendation:
Housing and food insecurity are inextricably linked issues, and many neighbors visit food pantries to free up limited funds to be spent on other basic needs. Food pantries should therefore be cognizant of and responsive to the housing concerns the neighbors they serve may have. Pantries should, for example, ensure that foods tailored to the needs and circumstances of unstably or marginally housed visitors as well as unhoused visitors are available, and allow households to swap items they cannot store or use for other items at the pantry when possible. Increasing pantry choice can help pantries reach this goal. Pantries could also promote and/or provide referrals to utility assistance programs as well as collaborate with other organizations to provide eviction and foreclosure prevention services.

SECTION 4 FINDING 5:

Seven in ten (72%) pantry visitors in Centre County use a personal vehicle as their primary means of travel, but a substantial share nevertheless faced issues with transportation.

One in four (25%) households reported choosing between transportation costs and food in the last year before fall 2025, including two in five households with children (37%). Smaller but still notable proportions of neighbors mentioned other transportation-related challenges to pantry access, including lack of a car or access to public transit (12%) and lack of funds with which to buy gas or bus fare to get to the pantry (13%).

Recommendation:
Transportation can be a serious barrier to a neighbor's ability to access charitable food assistance. Food pantries should leverage the full range of options available to overcome transportation barriers for neighbors, including using proxy services to allow friends or neighbors to pick up on behalf of individuals who cannot visit on their own, offering home delivery to households in need of it, and aligning distribution times and locations with local public transit schedules, if possible and applicable.

SECTION 4 FINDING 6:

Three in ten (28%) Centre County pantry visitors lack or have limited access to the traditional financial system.

One in ten pantry visitor households (10%) wholly lacks a bank account, forcing them to utilize potentially costly alternative financial services to access their money. Households who are unbanked or underbanked, meaning that they have a bank account but still use check-cashing services, payday loans, or money orders, must sacrifice portions of their income simply to use the funds, further stretching already strained budgets.

Recommendation:
Financial inclusion literature points to the importance of trusted local community partners like food pantries in reaching unbanked individuals. The charitable food system can work with local financial institutions and other nonprofits to connect unbanked and underbanked visitors to mainstream financial services that meet their needs. "Bankable" moments like tax filing season are key opportunities that can be leveraged to increase financial system access. Stakeholders should focus on increasing access to financial services that work well for people in a variety of circumstances, including bank accounts tailored to low-income households.



SECTION 4 FINDING 7:

Three in five pantry visitor households in Centre County (61%) have at least one member with a diet-related chronic health concern.

About two in five mentioned high blood pressure (45%) or diabetes (39%), while smaller shares said their households had at least one member with heart (17%) or kidney (10%) disease.

Recommendation:
It is important for the charitable food system to offer foods that meet the needs of a wide variety of visitors. The charitable food system should take potential dietary restrictions into account when ordering and work to source as much fresh, nutritious food as possible to ensure that neighbors can access food that they need, want, and that works for any medical requirements they may have. As food insecurity is a social determinant of health, there is potential for food banks and pantries to collaborate with healthcare providers through partnerships around Food as Medicine work, Medicaid 1115 waivers, and HealthShare programming. Increasing produce offerings represents an excellent opportunity to address population health challenges given the immense reach of the charitable food system.



Conclusion and Final Recommendations

This report is the end product of a yearlong project that sought to improve understanding of Centre County's charitable food system and the experiences of the neighbors it serves via a comprehensive mixed-methods evaluation.

In order to ensure that the food insecurity and charitable food landscape was depicted accurately, this report included analysis of publicly and privately available secondary data, incorporated academic research, and gathered a wealth of primary data from pantry staff, volunteers, and vitally, the people who rely on food pantries to make ends meet.

The research team behind this report always strove to center Centre County's food insecure neighbors by not only describing their lives and the often-difficult circumstances they face with care, compassion, and dignity, but also using the information they generously shared with us to create an informative, actionable resource that can act as a roadmap to real change within and beyond the charitable food system.

Though the publication of this report marks the end of this project in many ways, it is in reality the first step in a new, more important one: the real work of making sustainable change for food insecure neighbors in Centre County and, eventually, ending hunger.

This ongoing project will require dedicated, sustained, cooperative work from a variety of stakeholders, ranging from food pantries to government to health systems to academia to the private sector and beyond, to implement the recommendations contained here, analyze their effects, and evaluate outcomes.

Only by building a coalition for change and working together will we be able to create a Centre County in which no one faces hunger.



Acknowledgments

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Every neighbor who shared their thoughts with us provided priceless insight into the reality of their lives and the true experience of food insecurity. Of all the words in this document, the most valuable are theirs.

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Similarly, without their flexibility around surveys so we could meet our neighbors, their willingness to let us conduct non-participant observations so we could understand the pantry network holistically, their feedback via the pantry surveys and listening sessions, and most importantly their dedication to the individuals and families they serve, this project would not have been complete.

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