

SNYDER, UNION, & NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COMMUNITY HUNGER MAPPING:

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



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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. What is the extent of food insecurity in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties, and where in the region is it concentrated?
2. Who in the SUN region is most impacted by food insecurity? How do food insecurity rates and the main drivers of food insecurity differ by age, race and ethnicity, or other factors?
3. How accessible is charitable and retail food throughout the SUN Counties and how does access vary in different areas of the region? How does access vary, if at all, by demographics?
4. What barriers do neighbors face in accessing charitable food services? Where do food distribution and access gaps exist in the SUN Counties? What is the neighbor experience at food pantries like?
5. What are utilization rates of key government nutrition-related assistance programs and how do they vary across the region? What is the charitable food system’s role in this space?
6. What other issues impact food insecurity in the SUN Region? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

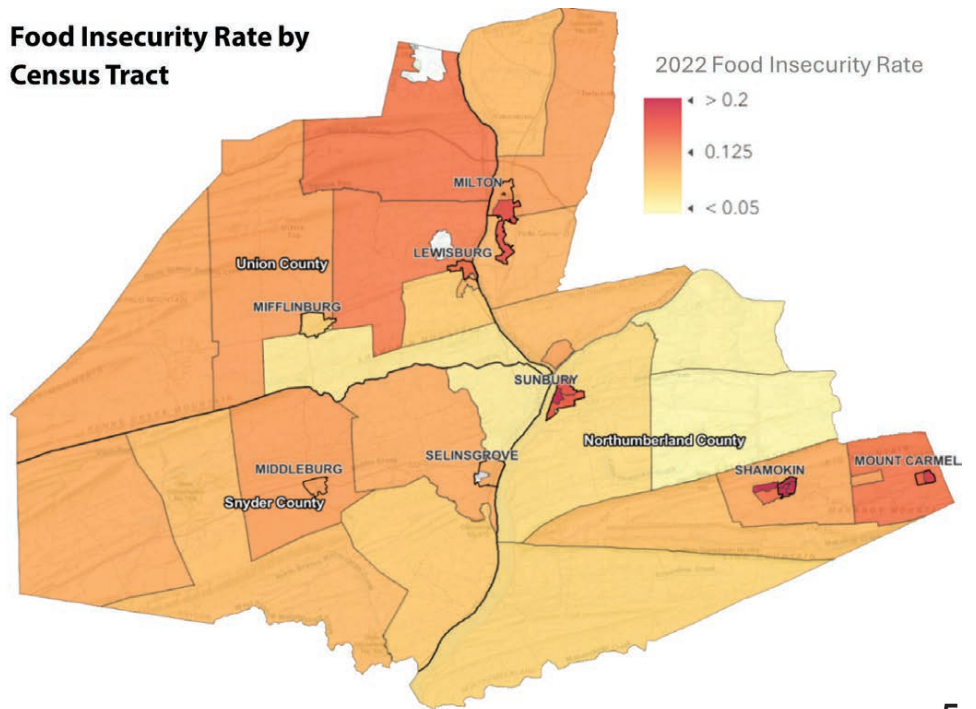
Food insecurity exists and is a significant issue in every municipality in the SUN region. But the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity varies based on demographic factors such as location, age, race and ethnicity, main source of income, and household type.

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

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

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

Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract



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

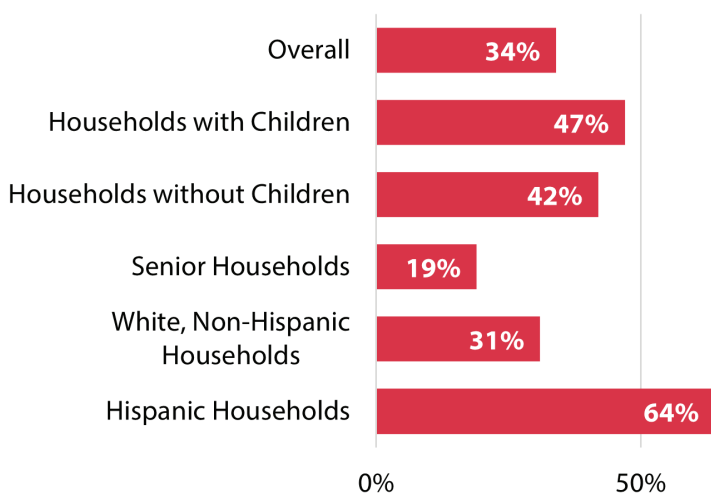
Food insecurity increased 43% among children in 2022. Food insecurity increased by 26% for all individuals over 2021, but the impact was most acute among children. This differential increase is a direct result of the end of the expanded child tax credit.

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

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

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

Very Low Food Security Status by Household Type and Ethnicity



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

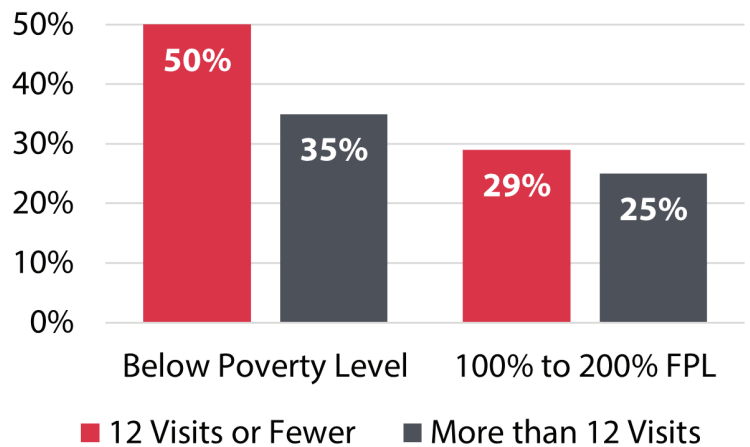
Avenue One – Charitable Food System

Key Findings:

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

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

Very Low Food Security by Visit Frequency and Income



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

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

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

Limited Evening and Weekend Access

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

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

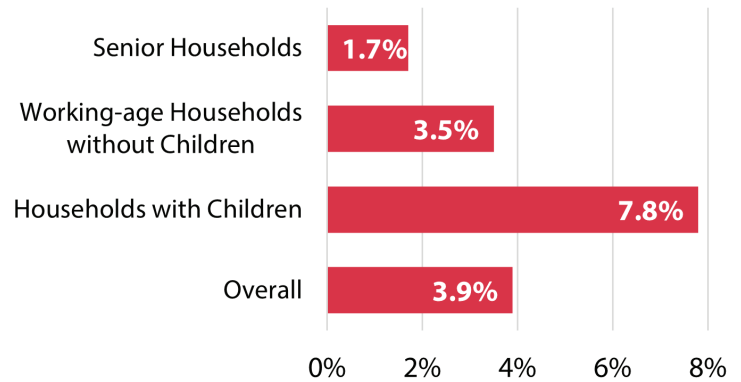
Higher Reported Feelings of Judgment for Households with Children and Hispanic Households

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

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

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

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

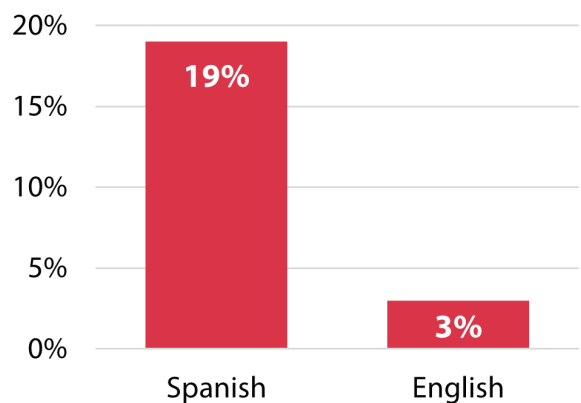


Variable and Uncertain Language Accessibility

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

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

Reported Feelings of Judgment by Survey Language



Significant Wait Times and Long Lines

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

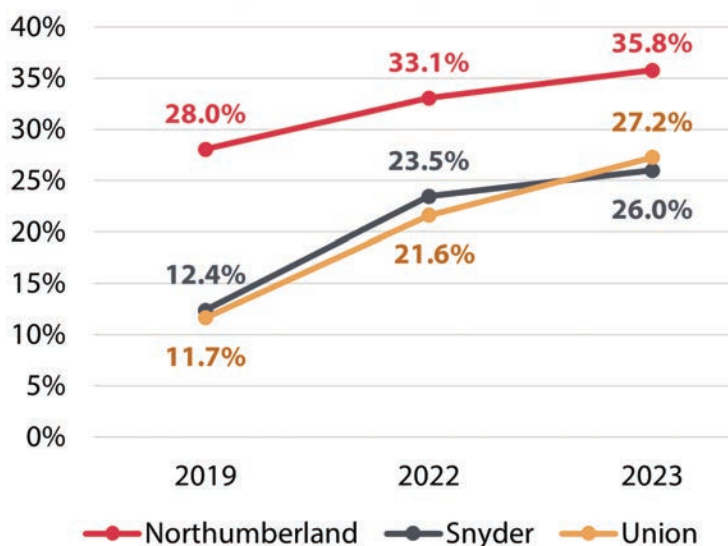
The charitable food system should experiment with a variety of ways to reduce wait times and long lines including opening more frequently, especially on weekends and evenings. While it can be difficult given capacity constraints, pantries should work to ensure food offerings are as similar as possible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

Avenue Two – Increasing Participation in Key Government Programs

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

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

Average Daily School Breakfast Participation Rate by County 2019-2023



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

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

Avenue Three: Household Income and Other Key Economic Factors

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

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

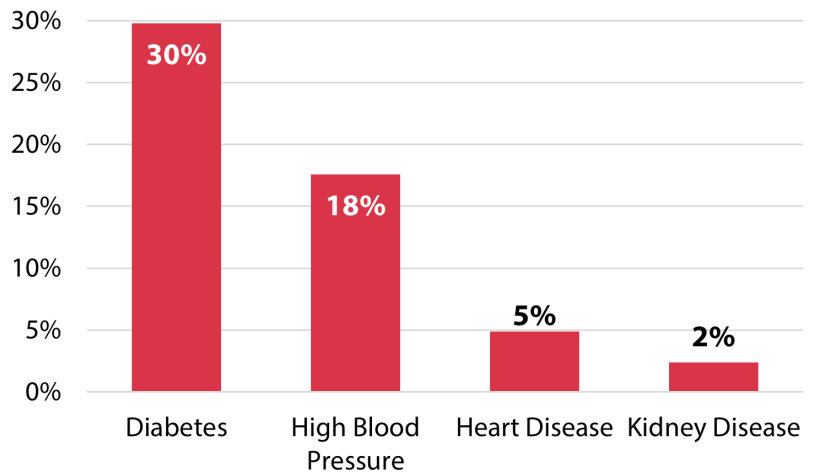
- Instead, inadequate fixed benefit amounts for Social Security or pension beneficiaries, and especially for SSDI and SSI (Disability) recipients, are major reasons that senior households, households with disabled members, and households with children struggle to make ends meet.
- The main barriers to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

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

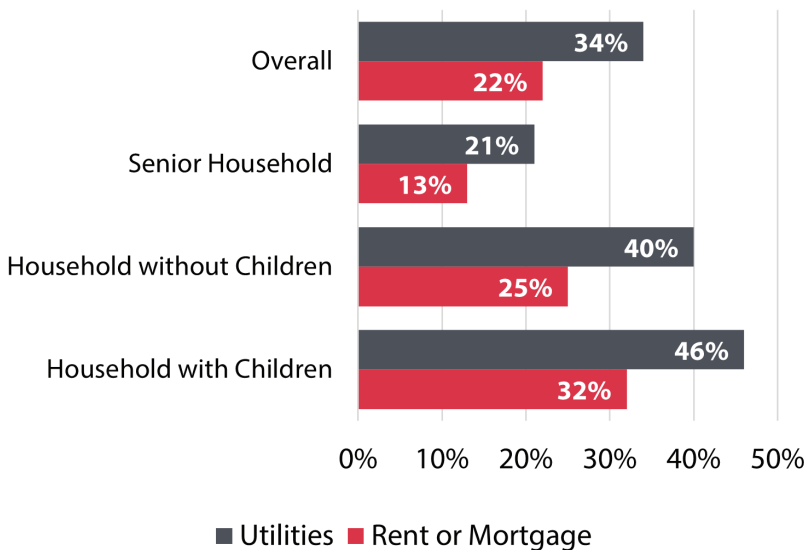
More than one in three pantry visitors reported choosing between utilities or food in the last year, while more than one in five indicated choosing between food and rent or mortgage. The charitable food system should continue to scale utility and housing assistance activities, as pantries represent a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

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

Prevalence of Specific Health Conditions among Pantry Visitor Households



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



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

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

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

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

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

–Interview Participant



METHODS

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

SECONDARY ANALYSIS

This report's secondary analysis draws upon data from a variety of different sources including the American Community Survey 2017-2021 5-year data, 2020 Census Data, USDA retailer and food desert data, SNAP participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, WIC participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, United Way ALICE 2023 data, child congregate meal program site and participation data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and USDA, and Feeding America Map the Meal Gap 2022 data with 2020 food insecurity estimates. A detailed explanation of the SNAP priority outreach methodology, ArcGIS network analyses for drive and walk times, and methodology used to identify target schools for child nutrition outreach is provided in the technical appendix.

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

NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

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

NEIGHBOR INTERVIEWS

Interview subjects were randomly selected from a pool of individuals who participated in pantry visitor surveys. All individuals surveyed were given the option to provide a phone number for follow-up contact in the form of a 15- to 20-minute phone or Zoom interview in English or Spanish. CPFEB researchers developed a flexible interview guide and conducted all 10 interviews. The interviews asked about visiting a food pantry from the perspective of pantry users. The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed pantry visitors to speak about the most relevant or pressing matters related to their own experiences.

NON-FOOD PANTRY NEIGHBOR SURVEYS

Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at various community locations to determine why some potentially food insecure individuals do not currently visit a food pantry. The surveys were anonymous and included four questions, including two food security screening questions. Individuals were asked if they attend a food pantry; those who responded 'No' or 'I used to' were asked to explain their answers, both from a list of potential options and a free response blank. The non-food pantry survey results reflect responses from 44 total participants from various libraries across Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties.

PARTNER LISTENING SESSIONS

CPFEB agency partners from Snyder, Union, and Northumberland were invited to attend listening sessions in October and November 2023 to discuss strengths and challenges at the pantry level. The discussion-style session allowed for partners to identify and learn from each other's experiences and perspectives as pantry leaders within the community. Discussion topics include pantry and community strengths, sourcing and logistics, and challenges related to distribution. The CPFEB research team held two listening sessions in two different geographically central areas to make it easier for all partners to attend. Seventeen individuals participated in the listening sessions, representing 13 different agencies.

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

–Interview Participant

PARTNER SURVEYS

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

COUNTY LEAD AGENCY INTERVIEWS

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

PARTNER DATA SHARING AND SERVICE INSIGHTS

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



410 Neighbor Surveys
at 8 pantry locations



13 Partner Listening Session Participants
at 2 locations across the region



10 One-on-one Neighbor Interviews



14 Pantries Sharing Anonymous Service Data



44 Non-food Pantry Surveys



20 Partner Surveys



SECTION I: FOOD INSECURITY ANALYSIS

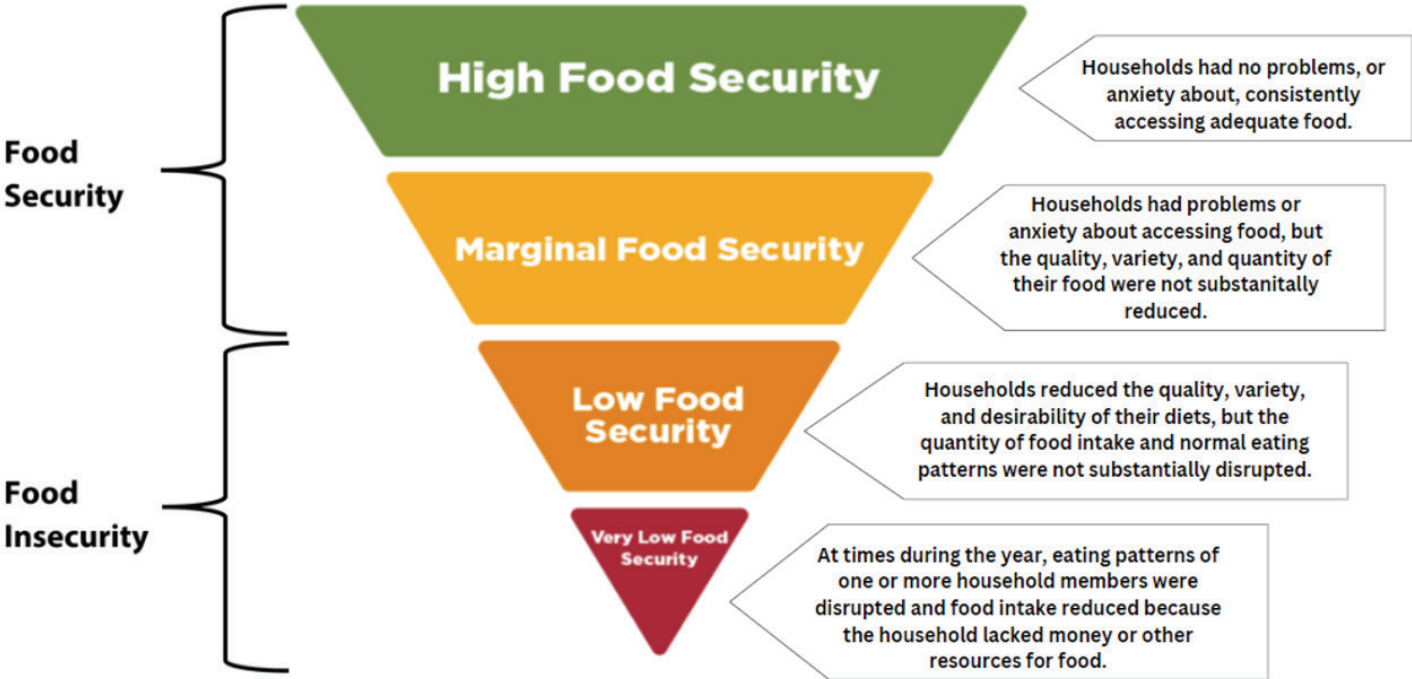
Food Insecurity: Low Food Security and Very Low Food Security

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

Food insecurity is made up of the latter two subcategories: low food security and very low food security. Low food security is defined by uncertain access to food and reduced quality and desirability of attained foods, while very low food security is defined by reduced food intake.

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

Levels of Food Insecurity



The mission of traditional food banking and food pantry work is to prevent people from needing to reduce the quantity and quality of foods they consume, even if they lack the funds to purchase food. Although traditional charitable food work cannot directly reduce the economic insecurity that causes worry about food access and corresponding low food security, it has great potential to impact very low food security. Therefore, the charitable food system in the SUN Counties should focus first and foremost on reducing very low food security.

Food Insecurity in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties

The SUN region, made up of Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties had a collective food insecurity rate of 12.5% in 2022, meaning one in eight people in SUN region are food insecure. In total, nearly 22,000 individuals face food insecurity across the three counties, including 5,500 children. Children make up more than one in four people who face food insecurity in the SUN region.

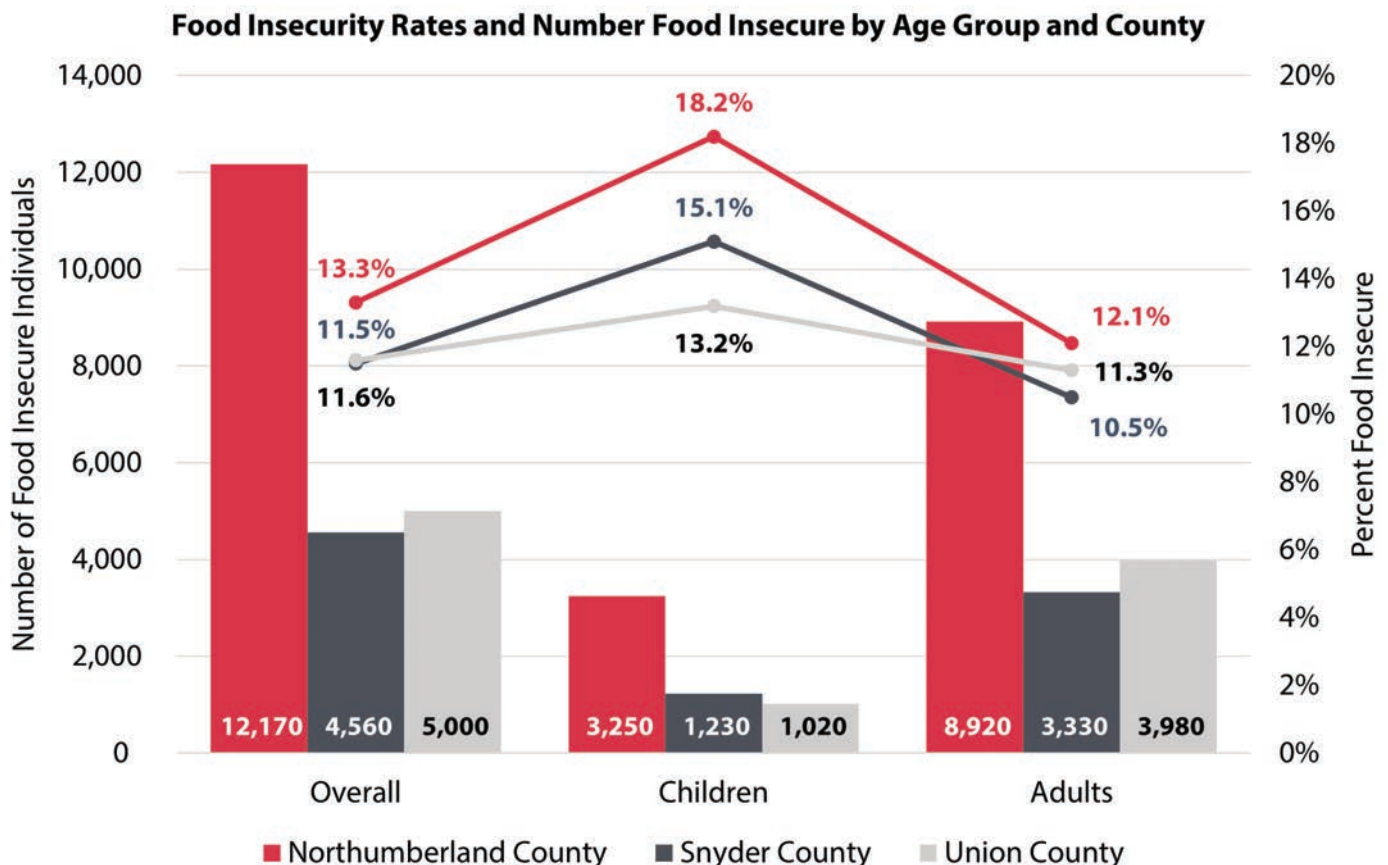
However, the overall food insecurity rate hides major differences in the experience of food insecurity across age groups, race/ethnicity, and geography in each county. **For each county, children face higher food insecurity rates than adults in every county, with an overall food insecurity rate of 16.3% compared to an overall adult food insecurity rate of 11.6%.**

The issue of child food insecurity is especially severe in Northumberland County, in which children face a food insecurity rate of 18.2% - nearly one in five children – and a rate that is 50% higher than the adult food insecurity rate. Although overall food insecurity rates are similar in Union and Snyder, Snyder has a higher child food insecurity rate compared to Union, while Union has higher adult food insecurity than Snyder County.

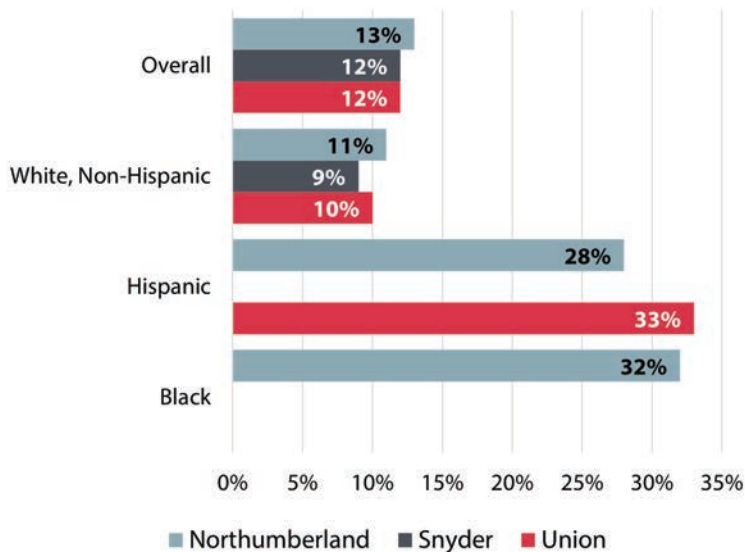
At the county level, Northumberland’s food insecurity rate of 13.3% is higher than the food insecurity rates in Union and Snyder County. Due to its larger overall population, Northumberland has more than twice as many food insecure individuals as either Union or Snyder. Northumberland County residents make up 56% of all food insecure individuals in the region and 52% of the total population.

In addition to differences by age and by county, there are significant differences in food insecurity by ethnicity.

It is important to note that there is no data available for Hispanic individuals in Snyder County or for Black individuals in Union and Snyder due to sample size limitations. However, the data available shows clear disparities; Hispanic individuals in Northumberland County are two and a half times as likely to experience food insecurity as white, non-Hispanic individuals, and Black individuals are three times as likely.



Food Insecurity by Race/Ethnicity by County



In Union County, the differences by ethnicity are even more striking, as Hispanic individuals are more than three times as likely to experience food insecurity as white, non-Hispanic individuals. Hispanic individuals in the county have a food insecurity rate of 33% compared to just 10% among white, non-Hispanic individuals. This rate of food insecurity among Hispanic individuals in Union County is the highest in all of Pennsylvania.

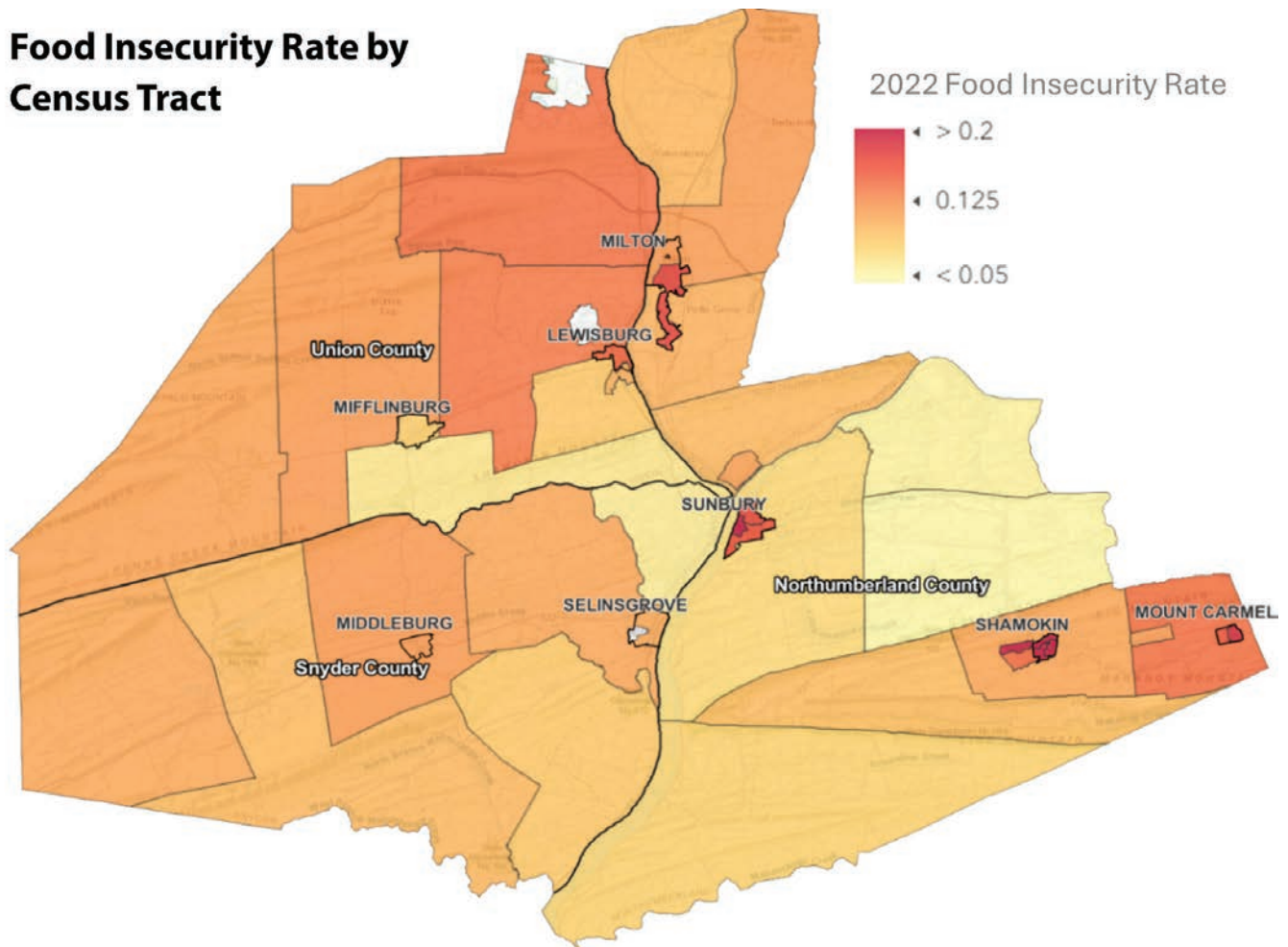
Sub-County Food Insecurity Rates

Differences in food insecurity rates exist across and between geographic boundaries such as ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (referred to hereafter as ZIP Codes or ZCTAs) and census tracts. ZCTAs are useful units of geography because they are well known to people who live in them and are easily identifiable through street addresses. Some datasets, such as Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and Pennsylvania Department of Health program and administrative data, are only available at the ZIP Code level for this reason.

However, ZCTAs have disadvantages. In many cases, especially in areas of high population like Sunbury, Lewisburg, and Selinsgrove, ZIP Code analyses mask disparities at the neighborhood level due to their varying size, irregular borders, widely uneven population sizes, and inclusion of portions of many municipalities.

Conversely, census tracts are more equal in population than ZCTAs, largely align with municipality borders in rural and suburban areas, and often represent neighborhoods within municipalities in cities, making them a practical geography to use when making program or policy recommendations. Due to its significant advantages, this report analyzes data at the census tract level by default and conducts ZIP Code level analyses when census tract analysis is not possible.

Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract



The map on the previous page shows food insecurity rates at the census tract level in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties in 2022. The highest food insecurity rates are concentrated in urban areas, especially those in Northumberland County.

Municipalities with high food insecurity rates include Mount Carmel, Shamokin, Sunbury, and Milton. Sunbury and Shamokin have the highest rates of food insecurity in the county, as all three census tracts in Shamokin have food insecurity rates above 21%, including census tract 815, which has the highest food insecurity rate in the region at 30%. All three of Sunbury's census tracts have food insecurity rates above 16%, as do both census tracts in Mount Carmel. The southern census tract in Milton has a food insecurity rate of 17%. No other census tract has a food insecurity rate more than 16%.

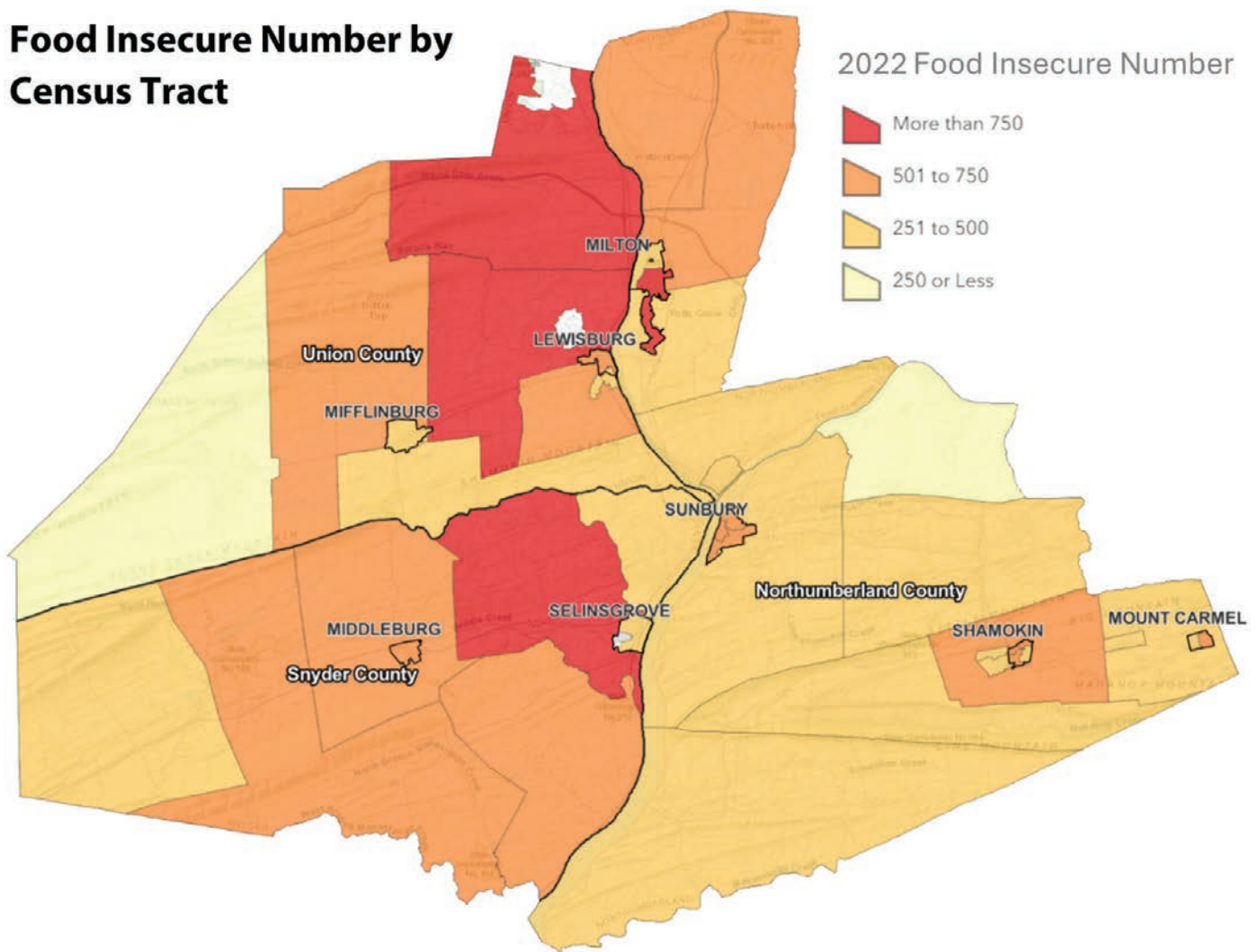
The highest food insecurity rate in Snyder County is 13% in Middleburg. The highest food insecurity rate in Union County is found in the northern part of the county, around Gregg Township and White Deer, at 15%. Similar rates are found in the census tract just to the south, which contains Kelly and Buffalo Townships, and in Lewisburg Borough.

The map below shows the total number of food insecure individuals by census tract in the SUN counties. The number is a function of the food insecurity rate and the population of each census tract.

Census tracts with more than 750 food insecure individuals include Milton, the census tract west of Selinsgrove, and two census tracts in the northeast corner of Union County.

The census tracts in the middle and southern ends of Snyder County have between 500 and 750 food insecure individuals, as do parts of Mount Carmel, Sunbury, Shamokin and its surrounding census tract, parts of Lewisburg, and the census tract north of Mifflinburg. The population centers in Northumberland County, including Milton, Sunbury, and Shamokin have 25.5% of the population and 37.2% of the food insecure population.

Food Insecure Number by Census Tract



Food Insecurity in the SUN Counties in Regional Context

The food insecurity rates for SUN counties are largely in line with surrounding counties, although Northumberland County has among the highest food insecurity rates in the region. Northumberland is highest among all its neighboring counties with an overall food insecurity rate of 13.3%, behind only Clinton and Mifflin counties, which have food insecurity rates of 13.7% and 14.6%, respectively.

Union and Snyder have middling food insecurity rates in the region at below 11.6% and 11.5%, respectively. Centre, Perry, Montour, and Dauphin counties have slightly lower overall food insecurity rates.

Child food insecurity rates are systemically higher for every county in the region, except for Centre County. Centre County's divergence from the trend is likely explained by the presence of Penn State University's Main Campus in State College; Penn State is a very large university and the student population has a skewing effect on much of Centre County's demography.

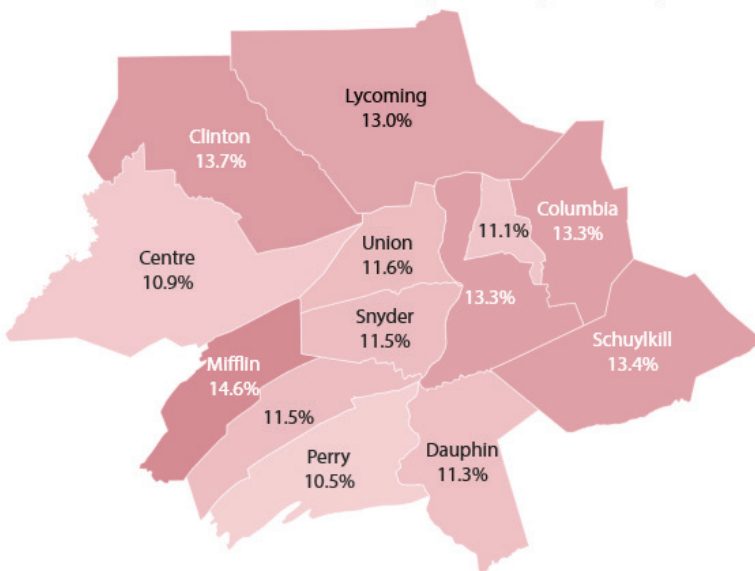
For every other county in the region, child food insecurity rates are significantly higher than overall food insecurity rates. Northumberland County has the fourth-highest child food insecurity rate in the region, at 18.2%, behind only Dauphin, Lycoming, and Mifflin Counties. Union County has among the lowest child food insecurity rates in the region, with a food insecurity rate of 13.2% that is only above Centre County.

NATIONAL FOOD INSECURITY DISPARITIES BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE

While more specific food insecurity data is currently not available at the local level, USDA annual reports provide breakdowns on the prevalence of food insecurity by household type at the national level. **Nationally, households with children are by far the most likely to experience food insecurity.**

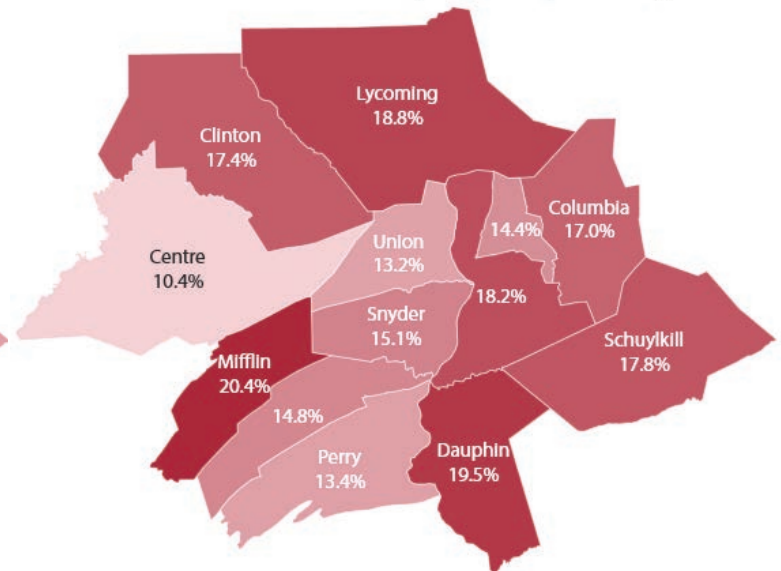
- Households with children had a food insecurity rate of 17.3%.
 - Food insecurity rates are highest for single female-headed households with children at 33.1%.
 - Single male-headed households with children had lower, but still elevated food insecurity rates of 16.2%.
- Households without children had a food insecurity rate of 11.0%.
- Households with seniors had a food insecurity rate of 9.1%, which is the lowest food insecurity rate of any household type other than households without children and more than one adult (8.6%).
- Elderly living alone households had a slightly higher food insecurity rate of 11.4%, but this was lower than working-age women or men households who live alone (15.1% and 13.8%, respectively).

Overall Food Insecurity Rate by County



Food Insecurity Rate
10.0% 21.0%

Child Food Insecurity Rates by County



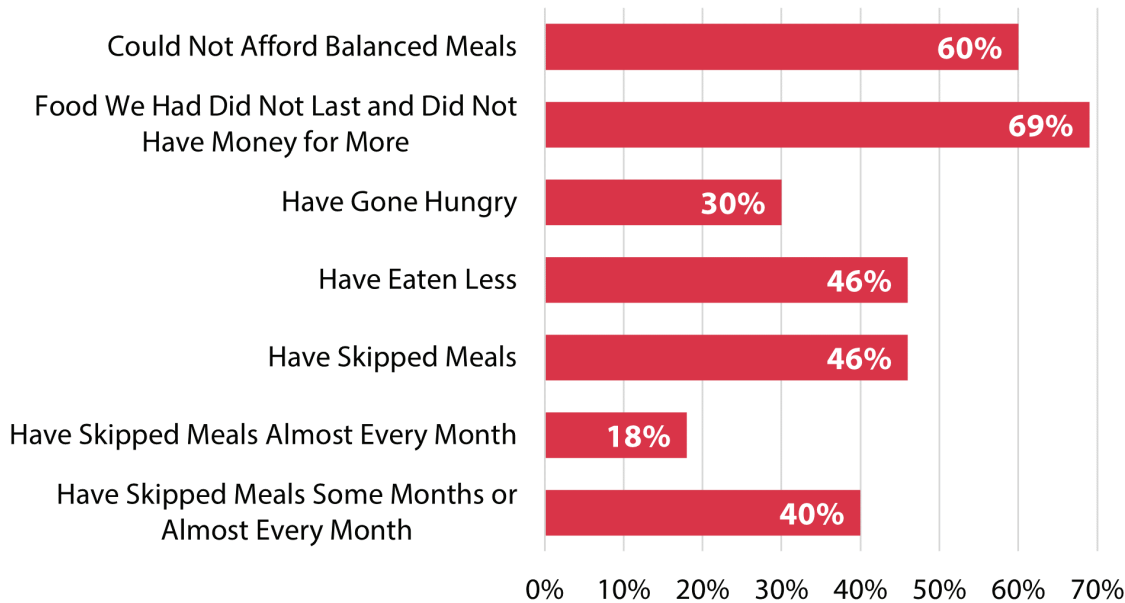
Child Food Insecurity Rate
10.0% 21.0%

The Extent of Food Insecurity among Food Pantry Visitors in the SUN Region

Relative to the overall population, food pantry visitors in the SUN region are much more likely to face food insecurity. **Based on survey responses, at least 64% of pantry visitors reported experiencing either low or very low food security, and 34% of food pantry visitors experience very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity.**

There are significant differences in very low food security and food insecurity experiences for pantry visitors by county. These differences largely reflect the overall differences in food insecurity by county in the SUN region. Food pantry visitors in Union and Snyder counties have slightly lower rates of food insecurity than pantry visitors in Northumberland County, including both very low food security and low food security. Food pantry visitors in Union and Snyder County have very low food security rates of 31% and 30%, respectively.

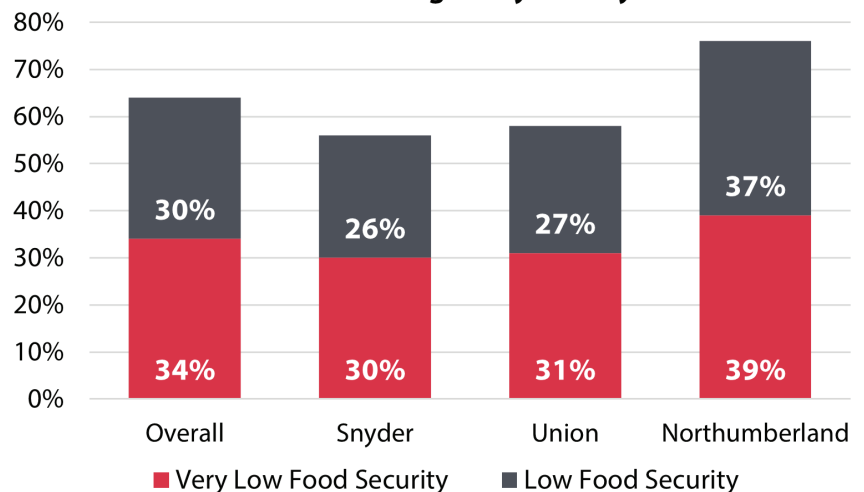
Responses to Underlying Food Security Questions among SUN Food Pantry Visitors



In Northumberland County, 39% of food pantry visitors reported experiencing very low food security and a total of 76% of food pantry visitors faced food insecurity. Food pantry visitors in Northumberland County are nearly 10 percentage points more likely to face both very low food security status and low food security relative to food pantry visitors in Union and Snyder counties.

Answers to the underlying food security questions from the USDA measure are provided in the figure above. Nearly 70% of pantry visitors responded that the food they had did not last and they did not have money to get more, and 60% reported not being able to afford balanced meals. Almost half of respondents (46%) indicated eating less or skipping meals, and a staggering 30% reported going hungry in the last twelve months because there was not enough money for food.

Food Security Status among Food Pantry Visitors in the SUN Region by County



"I don't know what we'd do without [the food pantry]. It fills the edge that the pandemic and inflation [put us] over the edge."

—Neighbor Survey Participant

FOOD INSECURITY BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE AND RACE/ETHNICITY AMONG SUN REGION PANTRY VISITORS

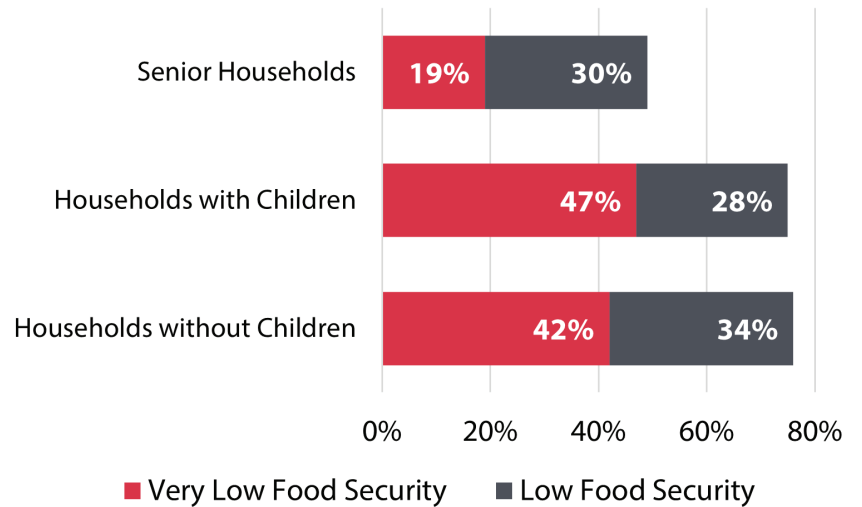
There are major differences in very low food security status and low food security status among pantry visitors by household types.

Households with children are the most likely to experience very low food security with rates of 47%, while households without children have very low food security rates of 42%. Seniors are by far the least likely to experience very low food security, with rates of 19%.

Fewer than 50% of senior households who visit food pantries are classified as food insecure, compared to 75% of households with children and 76% of working-age households without children. However, the official food insecurity status is not the only indication of need for charitable food assistance, as people can be classified as “food secure” but experience marginal food insecurity, which corresponds with anxiety around food access.

These differences in food security status by household type are consistent across every county in the SUN region. While there are slight differences by county, senior households are by far the least likely to experience very low food security. Households with children are the most likely to experience food insecurity in each county, followed closely by working-age households without children.

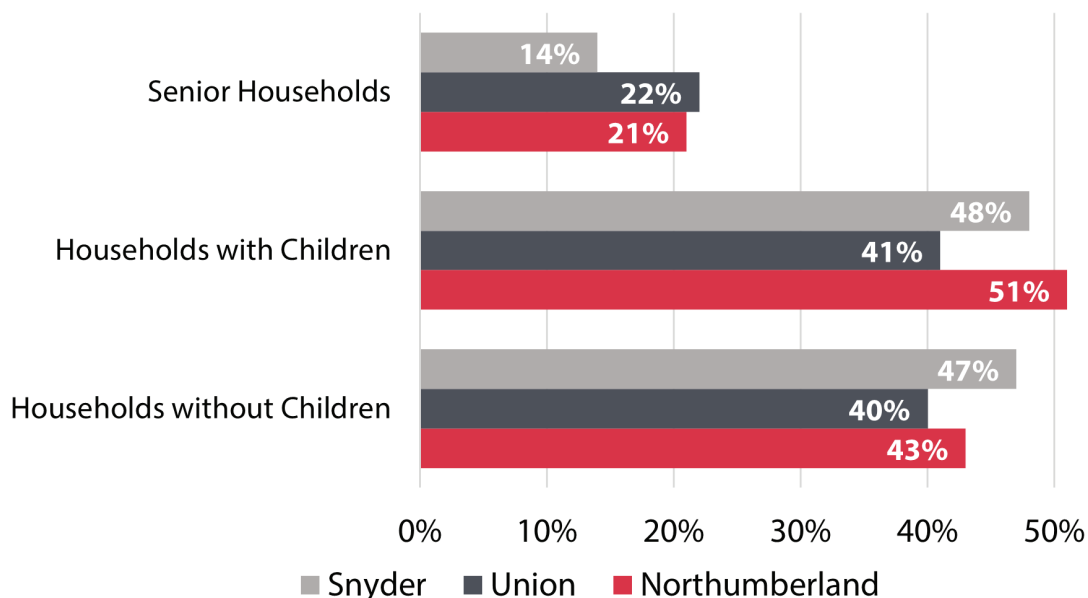
Food Security Status by Household Type for the SUN Region



Very low food security disproportionately affects working-age households in every county in the SUN region; the differences in very low food insecurity rates between counties are driven by differences in the proportion of food pantry visitor households that are senior-only compared to working-age.

Senior households comprise at least 50% of all households in Snyder and Union counties, but they account for just 29% of food pantry visitors in Northumberland County. As discussed above, neighbors of the same household type are similarly likely to experience very low food security regardless of county; there are simply fewer senior households in Northumberland County, resulting in an overall higher very low food security rate for food pantry visitors in the county.

Very Low Food Security by Household Type and County

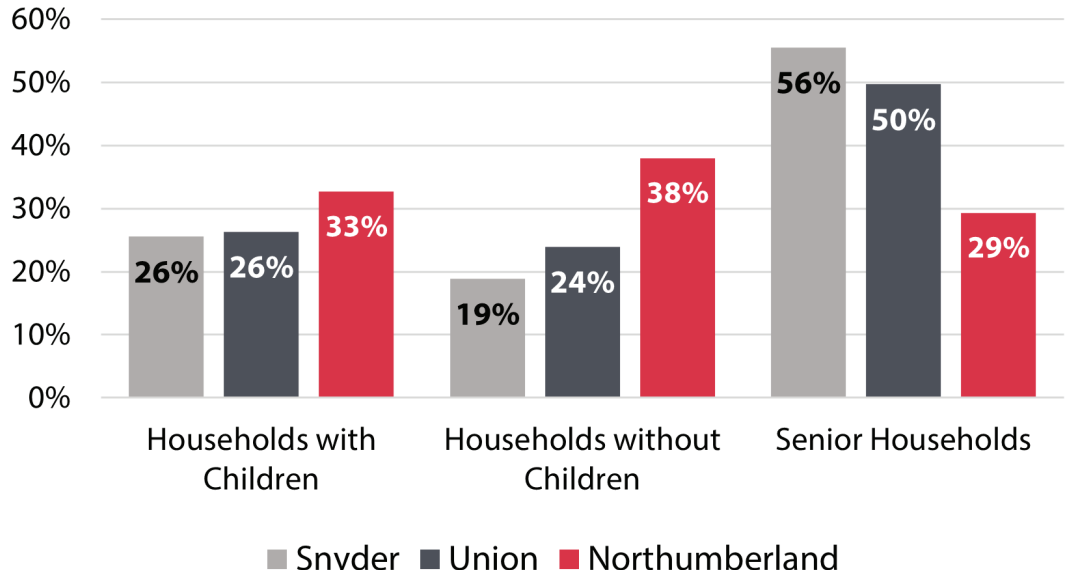


There are similarly stark differences in very low food security status by race/ethnicity among food pantry visitors in the SUN region, an issue that is consistent across counties, although there is too little data for survey respondent by race/ethnicity other than white, non-Hispanic to break up the data by county.

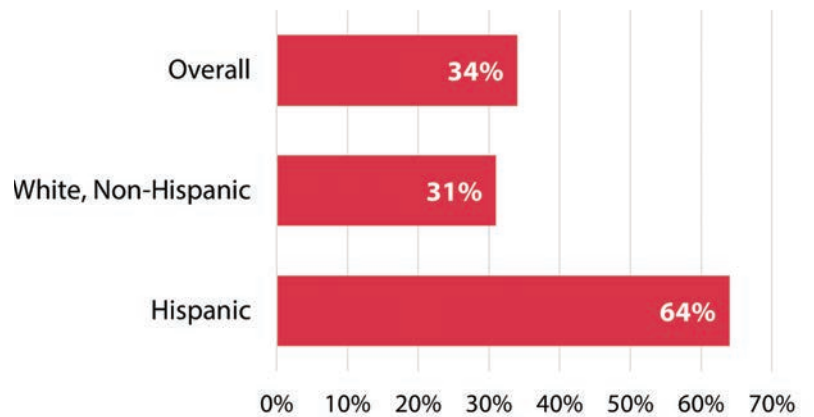
Hispanic households who visit food pantries are more than twice as likely as white households to experience very low food security. Nearly two thirds (64%) of Hispanic food pantry visitor households experience very low food security compared to just under a third (31%) for white food pantry visitor households. There is not enough data for Black and Asian households to calculate food security status. Part of the driving forces behind these differences include differences in household types, as Hispanic households are much less likely to be senior households than white households.

These patterns for food insecurity status by ethnicity among food pantry visitors follows county food insecurity rates overall, as Hispanic households are the most likely to experience food insecurity by a wide margin in both Union and Northumberland counties (there was not enough data to calculate this for Snyder County). With all of these relevant data points showing the acute experiences of food insecurity for Hispanic households in the county and at food pantries, the charitable food system in the SUN region must ensure it is serving Hispanic households well.

Household Type Breakdown for Food Pantry Survey Participants by County



Very Low Food Security Status by Ethnicity



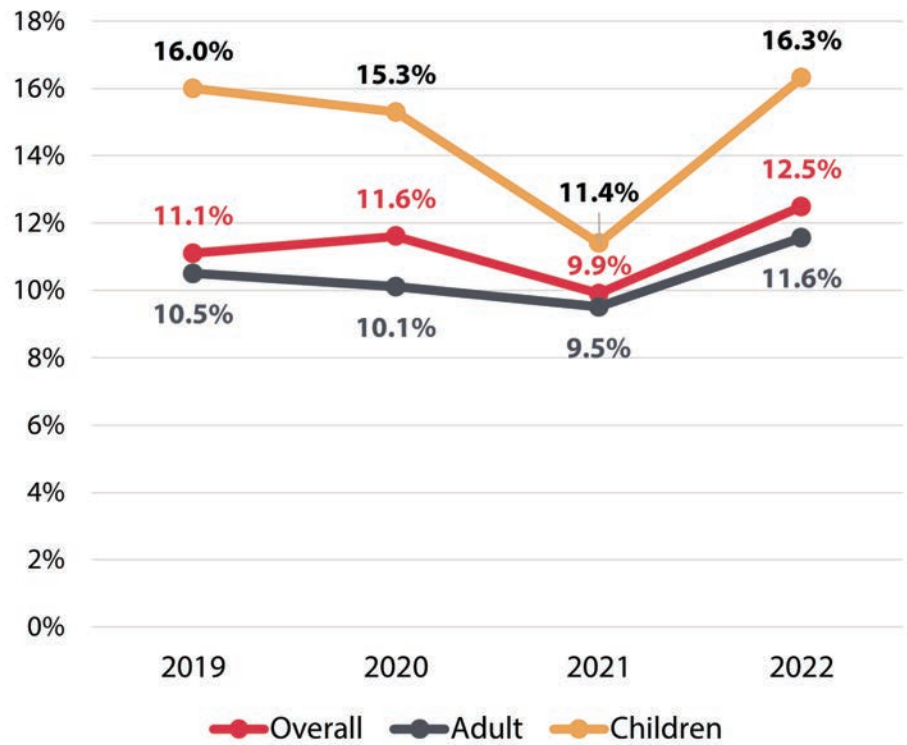
FOOD INSECURITY OVER TIME: THE IMPACT OF THE EXPANDED CHILD TAX CREDIT

Between 2021 and 2022, food insecurity in the SUN region increased by a staggering 26%. This rise is in line with the statewide and national food insecurity rates which increased at similar rates.

This unprecedented one-year increase in food insecurity was the result of the expiration of specific public policies enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the most impactful program being the expanded Child Tax Credit. When the expanded Child Tax Credit was enacted for one year in 2021, food insecurity, especially among children, decreased by 15%.

The positive impact of the expanded Child Tax Credit on reducing food insecurity was especially sharp among children, who experienced a 25% decrease in food insecurity rates from 2020 to 2021, and a 43% increase in food insecurity between 2021 and 2022. Food insecurity rates for children are now at record highs since Feeding America began calculating county-level child food insecurity rates. Nationally, food insecurity rates in 2022 were the highest they have been since the aftermath of the Great Recession in 2014.³

Food Insecurity Rates by Age Group in the SUN Counties Over Time



The major, targeted investment of the expanded Child Tax Credit paid off and drove the largest decrease in poverty and food insecurity for children since 1998, which is the earliest year from which comparable food insecurity data is available.^{4,5} However, Congress did not renew the expanded Child Tax Credit. The current child tax credit is much smaller, provided on an annual basis, and excludes the lowest income households, reducing its current impact on food insecurity. The expanded child tax credit in 2021 showed that a major investment in children can reduce lived food insecurity among children and push overall food insecurity below its previous floor, something that economic growth and low unemployment have not been able to do alone.

When the expanded Child Tax Credit was enacted for one year in 2021, food insecurity, especially among children, decreased by 15%.





Food Insecurity Main Findings and Recommendations

Section 1 Finding 1: As of 2022, one in eight people (12.5%) in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland County experiences food insecurity. This means nearly 22,000 individuals, including 5,500 children, face food insecurity. Children are 41% more likely to face food insecurity than adults in the SUN region, with a food insecurity rate of 16.3% compared to 11.6% for adults.

Recommendation: Food insecurity exists in every county and census tract in the SUN region. Sustained, targeted work across each county, focused on areas of high food insecurity, are critical to addressing food insecurity issues in the region.



Section 1 Finding 2: A third (34%) of food pantry visitors in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties experience very low food security, meaning they skip or cut the size of their meals each month. Nearly half of all households (46%) reported eating less or skipping meals because there was not enough money for food, while 30% indicated going hungry because there was not enough money for food.

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

Going forward, the charitable food system should work to incorporate short annual surveys that can measure progress along many dimensions, including accessibility and satisfaction with services, as well as very low food security over time. Surveying can be done with a two-question proxy from the USDA six question food security module that asks whether households are forced to cut or skip meals followed by the frequency with which they do so. Fully 95% of people who experience very low food security cut or skip meals either almost every month or some months and not every month. This could be the best way to consistently measure experiences of very low food security at food pantries.



Section 1 Finding 3: Households with children experience the highest rates of very low food security among all food pantry visitors. Households with children who visit food pantries in the SUN region have a very low food security rate of 47%, compared to 42% for working-age households without children and 19% for senior households.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should increase its accessibility to households with children to households with children in the SUN region, as they face the highest rates of very low food security among pantry visitors in every county. Encouraging more participation in and access to school meals could make a major difference on food insecurity rates in the SUN counties.



Section 1 Finding 4: Hispanic households have significantly higher food insecurity rates than white, non-Hispanic individuals in the SUN region, with Union County having one of the highest food insecurity rates for Hispanic households in the state at 33% and Northumberland at 28%.

Recommendation: With the major differences in food insecurity rates by race/ethnicity in the SUN region, culturally competent services and familiar foods catered to Hispanic households are critical to the success of the charitable food system in reaching everyone. Pantries should ensure they have Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers on a consistent basis and partnerships with businesses or Hispanic and Latino churches and community organizations could be pivotal.



Section 1 Finding 5: Food insecurity increased by 26% between 2021 and 2022 in the SUN region, with child food insecurity increasing by a staggering 43% in just one year.

In 2021, the expanded child tax credit caused the largest single-year reduction in child food insecurity rates since the USDA began tracking food insecurity in the late 1990's. When the expanded child tax credit expired in 2022, food insecurity increased to rates even above pre-pandemic levels.

Recommendation: Food security and anti-poverty stakeholders should continue to advocate for the reinstatement of the expanded child tax credit with policymakers. This policy would have the largest impact on child food insecurity of any potential program or government investment.





SECTION 2: ACCESS TO CHARITABLE FOOD IN THE SUN REGION

The SUN region's charitable food system has several key strengths, including extensive geographic access across a large region, a wide variety of available charitable food pantry models (including choice pantry access across much of the region), relatively strong rates of providing food people want and need, and overall low feelings of reported judgment for many pantry visitors. The most important strength of the charitable food system in the SUN region is that it measurably reduces very low food security for pantry visitors across the region. Food insecurity in the SUN region is lower than it otherwise would be thanks to the many efforts of community leaders and organizations across the region.

The SUN region has an active and involved Food Policy Council, in the Union-Snyder Hunger Coalition, which includes a SUN Food Access Committee. The Union-Snyder Hunger Coalition is led by the Union-Snyder Community Action Agency, meets on a quarterly basis, and coordinates efforts among a wide range of stakeholders, including charitable food providers. The strength of this coalition means that the SUN region can work together in an impactful way to reduce food insecurity in the region.

Concurrent with these strengths, there remains room for improvement in ensuring the charitable food system is as accessible as possible to all households. In the SUN counties, areas of focus include ensuring that households with children, working-age households without children, and Hispanic households can all equitably and meaningfully access food pantries as a low-barrier support. Each of these three household types underutilizes the region's charitable food system.

Underutilization of the charitable food system by these household types occurs due to several barriers which impact these households disproportionately and uniquely, including limited off-hours access to food pantry, higher reported feelings of judgment among these household types, lower reported frequencies of receiving desired foods, variable and uncertain language accessibility, and differential impacts from wait times and long lines.

These barriers are compounding and intersectional. Access is further limited when a household falls into two or more of these categories. For example, households with children face more barriers than working-age households without children, and Hispanic households with children have more limited access than white non-Hispanic households with children.

Given the demonstrable positive impact pantries have on reducing food insecurity across the region, it is important to ensure these critical resources are accessible to everyone who needs food assistance. Pantries often make the most of limited resources, and more support and capacity-building efforts are needed to ensure that pantries are empowered to offer equitable access to all households across the region. This section will explore a variety of different access dimensions and provide recommendations for how to build on the very real strengths of the charitable food system to improve access, especially for groups who underutilize the system.

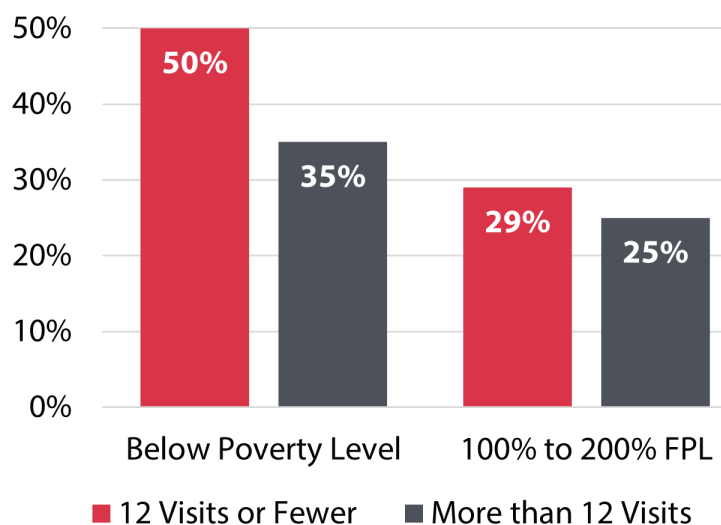
Strengths of the Charitable Food System

IMPACT ON VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY

Neighbor survey results show that the charitable food system in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties reduces very low food security. The hard work invested into the charitable food system by organizations, staff, volunteers, and supporting stakeholders makes a measurable difference in reducing experiences of hunger across the SUN counties.

As shown in the chart below, experiences of very low food security drops by 30% among households with incomes below the federal poverty level, dropping from a staggering 50% for households who visit the charitable food system twelve times or fewer to 35% among households who visit the charitable food system more than a dozen times in the last year.

Very Low Food Security by Visit Frequency and Income



For households with incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level, the relative impact of visiting the charitable food system is smaller, but still significant. Households with incomes between 100% and 200% FPL who visit the charitable food system more than twelve times in the last year have very low food security rates that are 14% lower than households who visited the charitable food system a dozen or fewer times in the last year, at 25% compared to 29%.

Comments from pantry visitors who took surveys confirm the impact the charitable food system can have on experiences of very low food security. One neighbor said, "We appreciate the food pantry! Without them we would be saying yes to the [food security] questions you ask. We are blessed. Thank you."

GEOGRAPHIC PANTRY ACCESS

Geographic access across the SUN region, as measured by the number of food insecure individuals in a census tract per pantry within a 15-minute drive time, is relatively strong in that most food insecure individuals have at least one local food pantry.

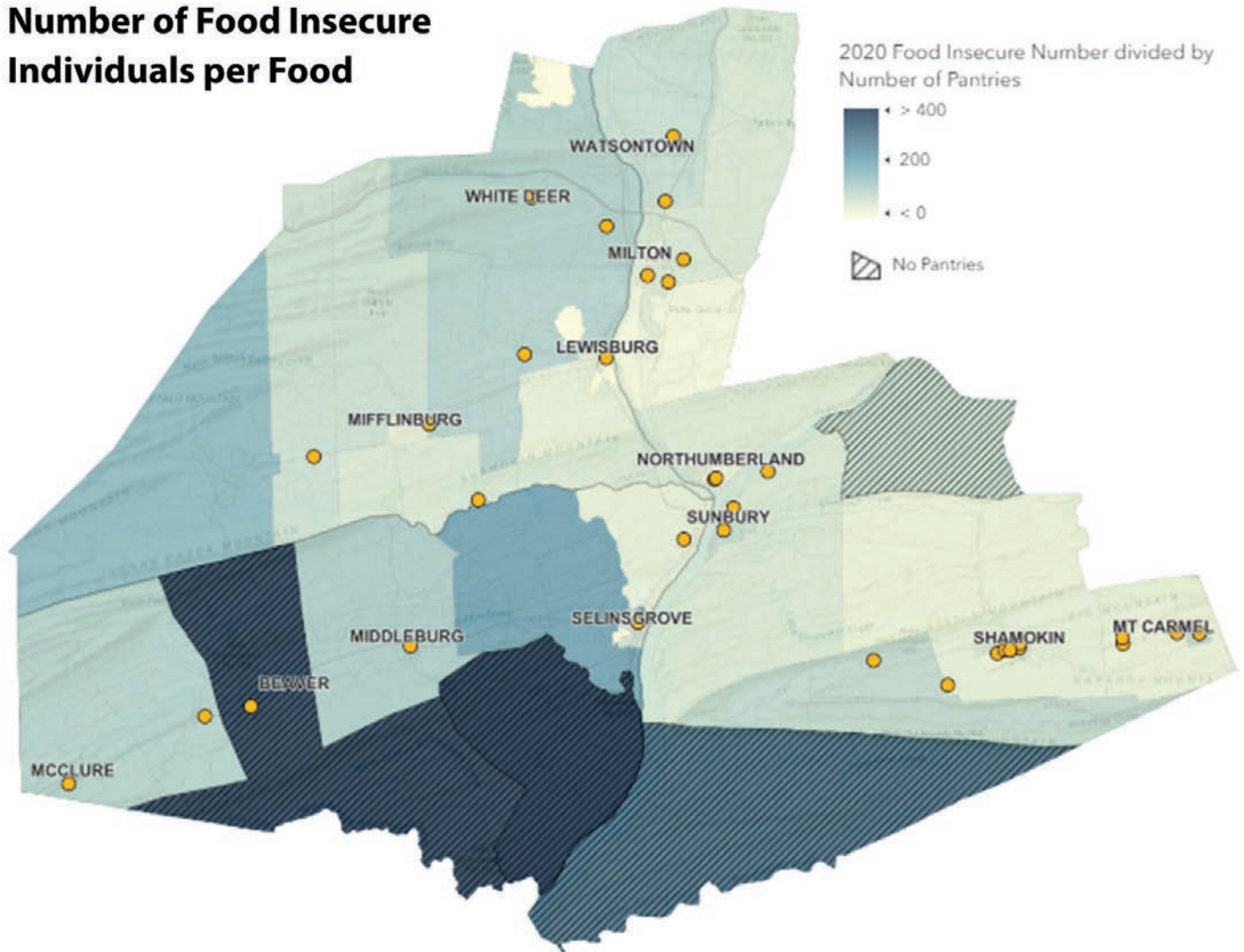
Access is most robust in and around population centers. The areas around Mifflinburg, Lewisburg, Milton, Northumberland, Sunbury, Selinsgrove, Shamokin, and Mt. Carmel all have access to more than five pantries within a 15-minute drive time and relatively few food insecure individuals per pantry. Most other census tracts have access to two to five pantries within a 15-minute drive.

Out of all the census tracts with at least one food pantry in a 15-minute drive time, the tract between Selinsgrove and Middleburg has the highest number of food insecure persons per pantry at roughly 220 food insecure persons per pantry. The west end of Union County has 170 food insecure individuals who have access to just one pantry in a 15-minute drive. Compared to the gaps identified in other counties, the number of food insecure individuals per pantry by census tract in the SUN region is relatively robust.⁶

However, there are four census tracts with no local pantries. Aside from the census tract north of Elysburg, which is within 15 minutes of pantries in Danville in Montour County, these census tracts are concentrated on the southern edge of the SUN region.

Of the census tracts with no food pantry in a 15-minute drive, the census tract containing Port Trevorton and Freeburg in Snyder County has the most food insecure individuals per pantry with 410 food insecure individuals.

Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Food



The census tract directly west of that, which covers Beaver, West Perry, and Perry Townships, as well as Beavertown borough, is home to 380 food insecure individuals who lack access to a food pantry within a 15-minute drive time according to this analysis method, even though there is a pantry within the census tract. This apparent contradiction is because the 15-minute drive time radius is calculated from the census tract center of population, which falls on the top of Shade Mountain and lies between the two distinct actual population centers in the census tract. The placement of the population center on top of Shade Mountain means the 15-minute drive radius largely follows Shade Mountain Road, which is not within 15 minutes of the pantry in Beaver Township. This means that neighbors in the northern half of the census tract have local access to the pantry in Beavertown, but the neighbors in the eastern half likely do not.

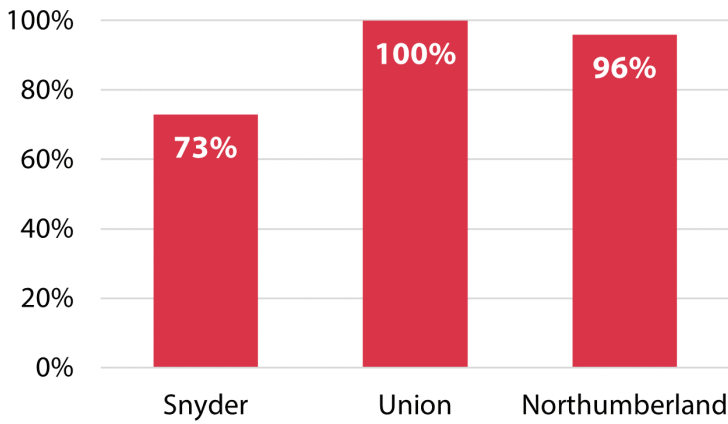
Across the Susquehanna River, the southernmost census tract in Northumberland County has 310 food insecure individuals with no access to a local pantry. **In total, there are more than 750 food insecure individuals in the southern end of Snyder and Northumberland counties with no access to a pantry in a 15-minute drive of their census tract center of population.**

Utilization of Food Pantry Services By Census Tract

While geographic proximity is a useful measure of food pantry accessibility, it cannot account for whether people are actually able to find and use a food pantry when they need it. In the long term, measures of pantry utilization at the census tract will be the most useful way to determine whether there are areas of the SUN region without sufficient pantry access.

To assess actual pantry utilization gaps, this analysis calculates the number of unique individuals who visited the charitable food system in the last year for each census tract and subtracts that number from the number of food insecure individuals in each census tract. For this analysis, records from pantries using Service Insights on MealConnect (SIMC), an electronic neighbor intake tool provided by Feeding America, were used to identify the number of unique individuals who had visited a food pantry between May 2023 and April 2024, then compared to the number of food insecure individuals per census tract as of 2020 Map the Meal Gap estimates.

Percent of Food Insecure Population with Choice Pantry Access by County



The map below shows the resulting pantry utilization gap calculations by census tract. This map shows that the largest utilization gaps are centered around the population centers of the region, namely Lewisburg and the surrounding census tracts north of it, the census tract outside of Selinsgrove, Sunbury, the area around Northumberland borough, and the areas in and around Shamokin and Mount Carmel.

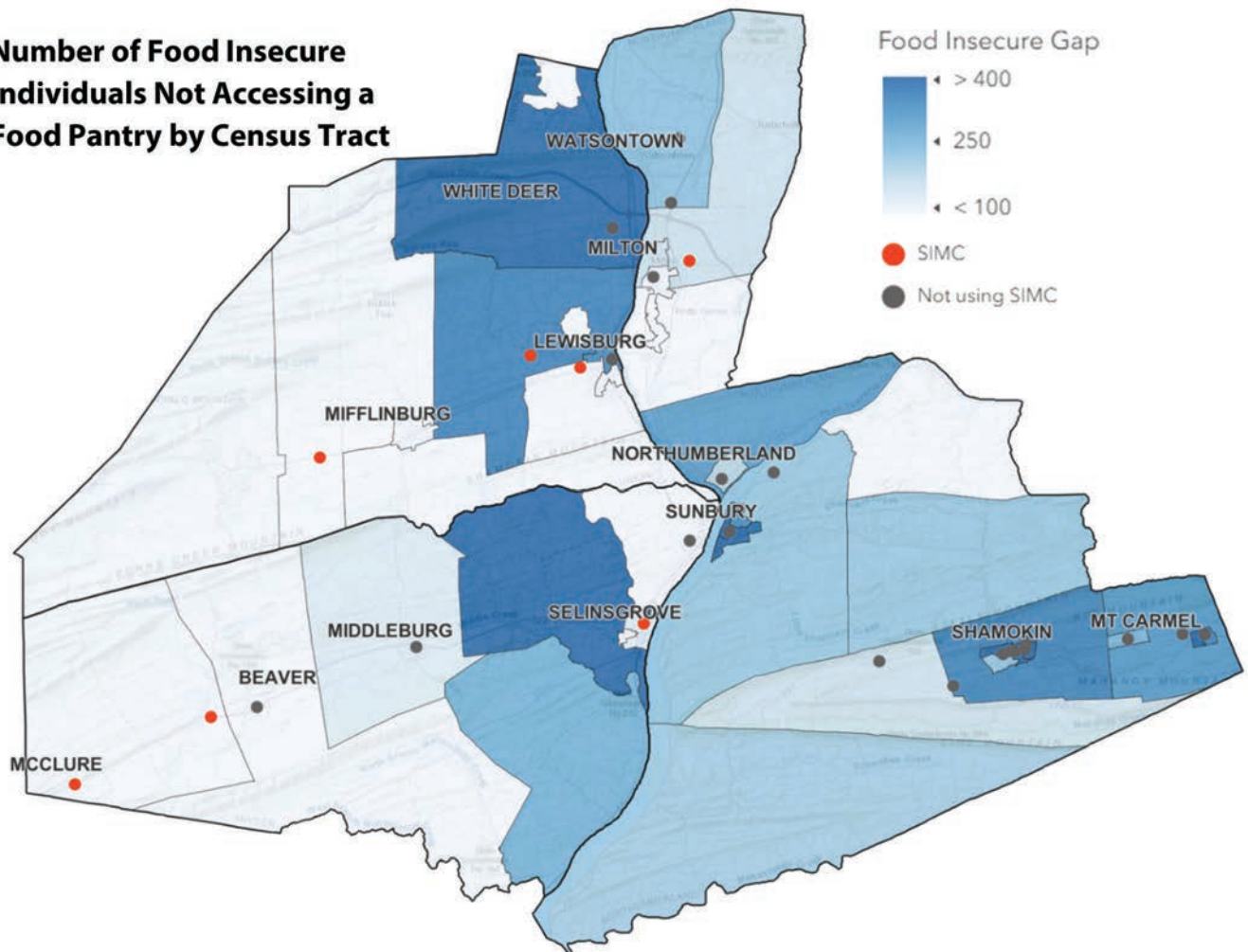
The gaps identified should not be viewed as actual utilization gaps, nor be used to inform major decisions. This map shows the potential of using pantry visit data for access calculations and decision-making, but the current data is too limited to show anything definitive, especially since there were very few pantries in Northumberland County using SIMC in the period this analysis examines. SIMC pantries are shown in red, while pantries not utilizing SIMC are shown in gray.

CHOICE PANTRY AVAILABILITY

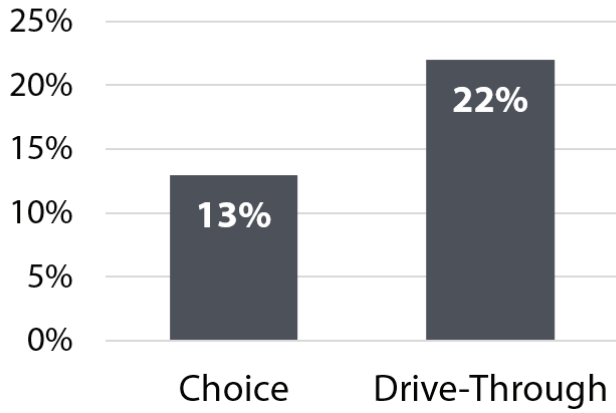
Choice shopping models add a degree of dignity and autonomy to the neighbor experience. Providing neighbors with greater choice allows them to select foods that align with their cultural preferences, health restrictions, and dietary needs. Choice models have lower food waste, making choice beneficial for the use of pantry resources as well.

In the SUN region, choice pantries have just 13% of pantry visitors who indicated being unable to use more than 10% of the food they receive. Drive-through pantries, on the other hand, have 22% of food pantry visitors who reported being unable to use more than 10% of the food they receive.

Number of Food Insecure Individuals Not Accessing a Food Pantry by Census Tract



Percent Reporting More than 10% Food Waste

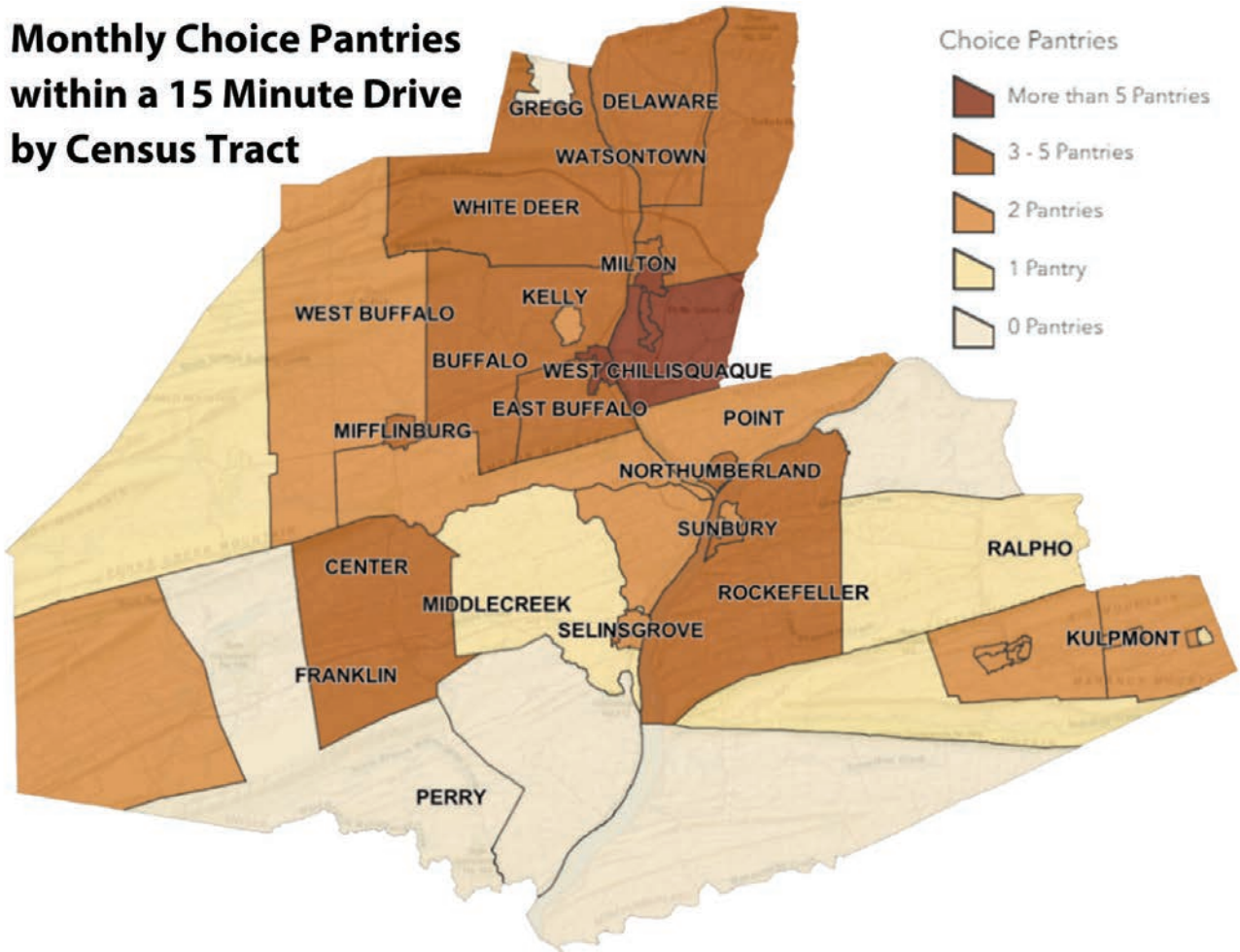


Choice pantry access, as measured by the availability of a choice pantry within a 15-minute drive time radius of each census tract's center of population, is strong across much of the SUN region. All food insecure individuals in Union County live in a census tract with a choice pantry within driving distance, while Northumberland County has similarly strong access, with 96% of the food insecure population within driving distance from a choice pantry. Snyder County has the most limited access to choice pantries at 73%. More than a quarter of food insecure individuals in Snyder County do not have access to a choice pantry within driving distance.

Geographically, the main population centers have the best access to choice pantries. The census tracts without access to choice pantries in the SUN counties are the same census tracts without access to any pantries; they mostly lie in the southern portion of Snyder and Northumberland counties. Rush Township in north-central Northumberland County does not have access to a choice pantry within Northumberland County, although this census tract is within a 15-minute drive time of a food pantry in Danville in Montour County.

Though choice pantry shopping appears to be a strength in the SUN region, especially considering the proportion of food insecure individuals with access to nearby choice pantries, access to a choice pantry does decrease slightly as the frequency of distributions increase. A total of 92% of food insecure individuals have access to a choice pantry on a monthly basis, and 88% have access on a bi-monthly basis. At a weekly basis, this proportion drops to just 57%. Ultimately, a majority of food insecure neighbors still have access to choice pantries on a regular basis, but not at the same frequency.

Monthly Choice Pantries within a 15 Minute Drive by Census Tract



OVERALL EXPERIENCES AT FOOD PANTRIES

In total, nearly two thirds of people in the SUN counties said they “often” or “always” (63%) receive foods they need or want from the food pantry they visit, while most of the other third mentioned “sometimes” (32%) receiving food they desire. These percentages are high compared to surveys in other community hunger mapping counties.^{7,8}

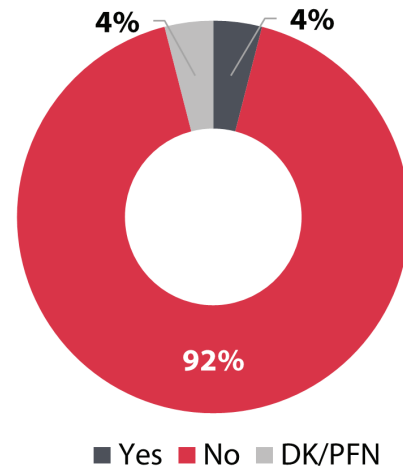
Comments in the surveys were generally positive, with people reporting that their pantry gives fruits and vegetables that they otherwise would not be able to afford. However, some respondents said they received moldy food in the past, and that the best food may run out before they arrive at the pantry.

There are also disparities in receipt of desired foods by household type and race/ethnicity, as Hispanic households and households with children were less likely to report receiving foods they “often” or “always” like from their pantry. Therefore, while the quality and variety of the food distributed is generally a strength of the SUN region’s charitable food system, there remains room for improvement.

Overall reported feelings of judgment are low across the SUN counties’ food pantries. Just 4% of households reported having felt judgment in the last year by a food pantry staff member or volunteer. This overall feeling of judgment is slightly lower than other community hunger mapping counties.^{9,10}

However, like the frequency of receiving desired foods, there are significant disparities in feelings of judgment by household type and by race/ethnicity. These differential experiences may contribute to underutilization of the charitable food system among these groups, as will be discussed at length in the next several sections.

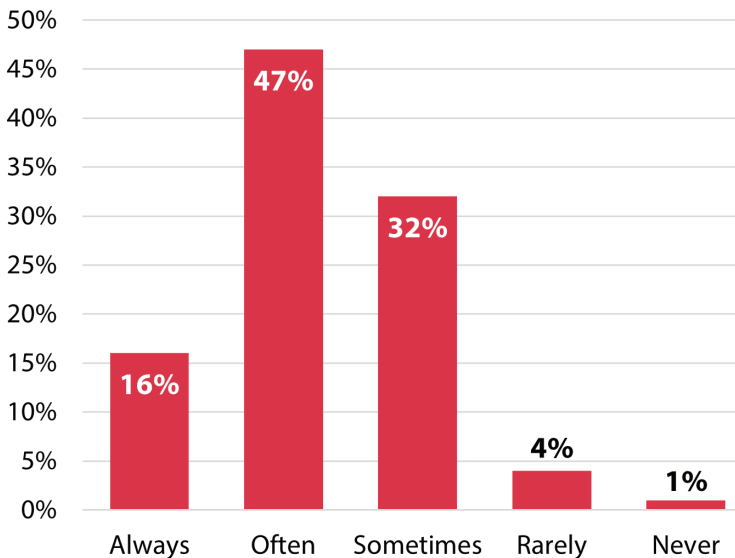
Percent of Respondents who Have Felt Judged at a Food Pantry



Areas of Growth For The Charitable Food System

While the charitable food system in the SUN region has many strengths, including reducing experiences of very low food security among vulnerable households, it also has areas for improvement and growth. The largest of these is that the region’s charitable food system is less accessible to households with children, Hispanic households, and working-age households. These households have higher rates of very low food security at higher rates than the overall population of pantry visitors and experience greater barriers to access along a variety of different dimensions.

Frequency of Receiving Desired Foods

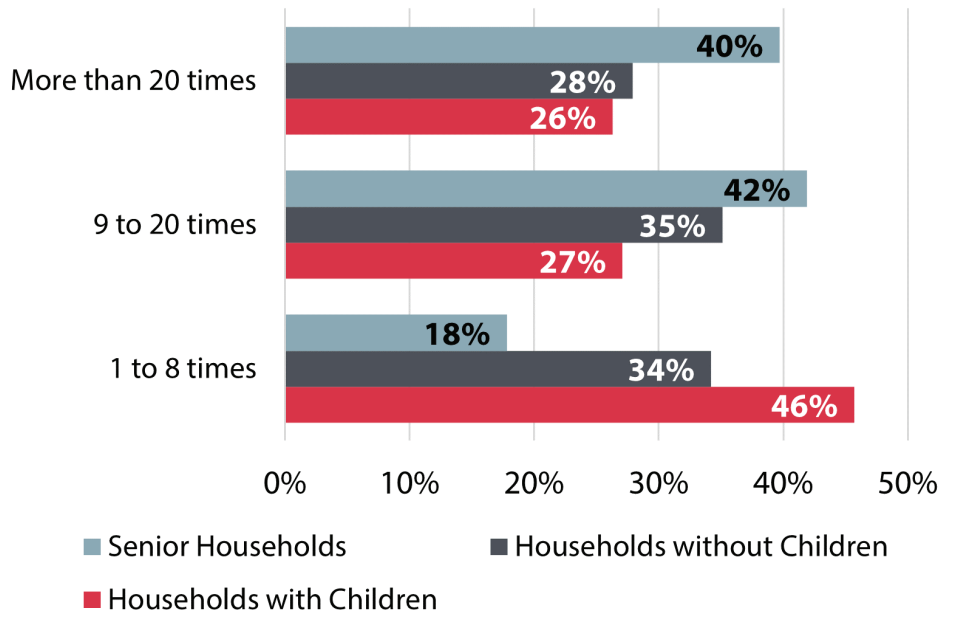


These access dimensions include:

- Access to pantries during non-business hours,
- Increased reported feelings of judgment,
- Language accessibility issues, and
- Wait times and long lines.

While different household types experience these access components differently, any improvements will have a major impact on the accessibility of the charitable food system for all households, including households who are not as impacted by these specific barriers. For instance, opening pantries outside regular business hours will help households who work during the day be able to access food and shorten lines for existing daytime distributions by spreading out demand.

Reported Frequency of Visiting a Food Pantry by Household Type



Pantry Visit Frequency By Household Type

Fewer households with children visit the charitable food system in the SUN counties than would be expected given the percentage of households eligible for federal and state-funded charitable food (under 185% FPL). Households with children make up 29% to 30% of households with incomes under 185% of the federal poverty level but just 26% of households who visit the charitable food system.

Households with children visit the charitable food system less frequently than other household types. Among survey respondents, 40% of senior households visited a food pantry more than 20 times in the last year, compared to just 28% and 26% of working-age households without and with children. On the other hand, 50% of respondent households with children visited food pantries fewer than eight times in the last year, while 34% of working-age households without children and just 18% of senior households do the same.

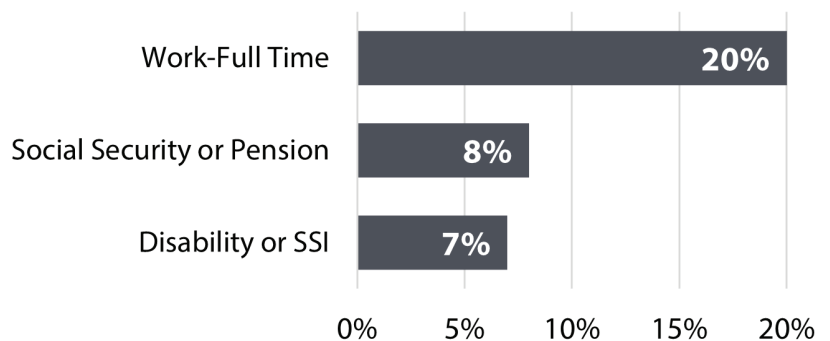
Overall, these results show that households with children visit the charitable food system at a lower rate than other household types and visit less frequently when they do visit food pantries.

A similar pattern for visit frequency holds for Hispanic households compared to white households. A total of 57% of Hispanic households visited the charitable food system one to eight times in the last year, compared to 36% of white households. These patterns are intersecting, in that Hispanic households are less likely to be senior households and more likely to be households with children, relative to white households.

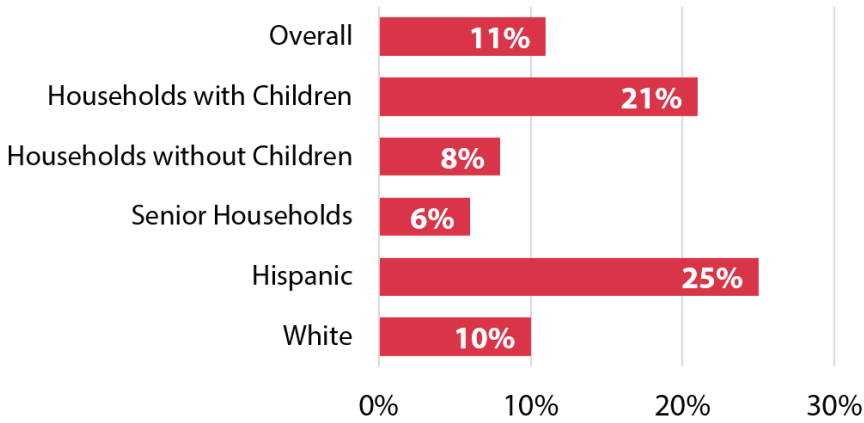
DAYS AND HOURS OF OPERATION

Employed households have the most difficulty accessing pantries in the SUN region. More than 20% of households whose main source of income is full-time work noted difficulty accessing pantries due to their hours of operation. This number is more than double the reported rate of time-based access difficulty among households whose primary source of income is Social Security, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI or Disability), or Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Percentage of Pantry Visitors Reporting that Pantry Times are a Barrier by Main Source of Income



Percentage of Pantry Visitors Reporting Time-Based Access Barriers by Household Type and Race/Ethnicity



Households with children expressed the most difficulty accessing pantries due to their hours of operation, at 21%. These households were the most likely to report working full-time. Just 6% of seniors and 8% of working-age households without children reported difficulty accessing food pantries due to their hours of operation. These differences in accessibility by time frame likely contribute to the under-utilization of pantry services among households with children.

Weekend and evening pantry hours are necessary for households with children because the majority of food pantry visitor households with children are employed full- or part-time. One survey respondent said that they began attending the food pantry after being unable to work due to their physical condition. They added that more of their neighbors would likely attend the food pantry if the opening times did not conflict with their work hours.

It is important to note that the surveys were conducted at food pantries, so the data does not account for people who cannot come to a food pantry at all due to limited hours of operation. Two non-food pantry survey respondents said they do not use food pantry services because of their hours of operation, with one respondent specifically citing a work conflict. "Having more hours for food distribution is key," they commented. "Being able to speak to someone is useful if needing food outside of collection distribution hours."

TIME-BASED ACCESS BARRIERS BY COUNTY AND CENSUS TRACT

Access to weekend or evening hours varies by location across the SUN counties. The following analysis identifies areas within the region where evening and weekend access within a 15-minute drive of each census tract is the most limited for neighbors, and where expanded access may make the biggest difference.

This analysis provides a good estimate of whether a neighbor in a given census tract has nearby access to either of these pantry types, though there are some important caveats.

First, the analysis does not account for service territory restrictions, which may prevent neighbors from crossing municipal boundaries to receive services. Second, households that do not have vehicle access are not fully accounted for, as their access is complicated by lack of transportation. Third, this analysis does not account for any gaps in awareness of local services, meaning that even where services are present, neighbors may not know enough about them to effectively utilize them. Because of these qualifications, this analysis provides an overestimate of access to weekend and

evening hours, so any gaps identified in this analysis should therefore be considered major gaps in access.

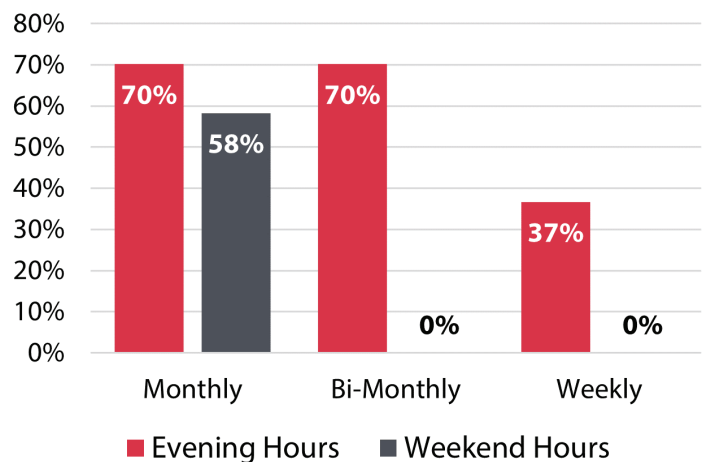
Access to pantries operating outside regular business hours differs greatly by county within the SUN region.

Neighbors experiencing food insecurity in Northumberland County have excellent access to weekend and evening hours with 74% and 77% of food insecure neighbors within driving distance of these pantries respectively.

Union County neighbors have similar access to evening hours (77% of the food insecure population), but fewer neighbors have access to weekend hours. Only 40% of food insecure individuals in Union County live within driving distance of a weekend pantry.

Access in Snyder County is even more limited, as only 40% of food insecure neighbors have local access to evening pantries and just 21% have local access to weekend pantries.

FI Population with Weekend and Evening Access by Distribution Frequency

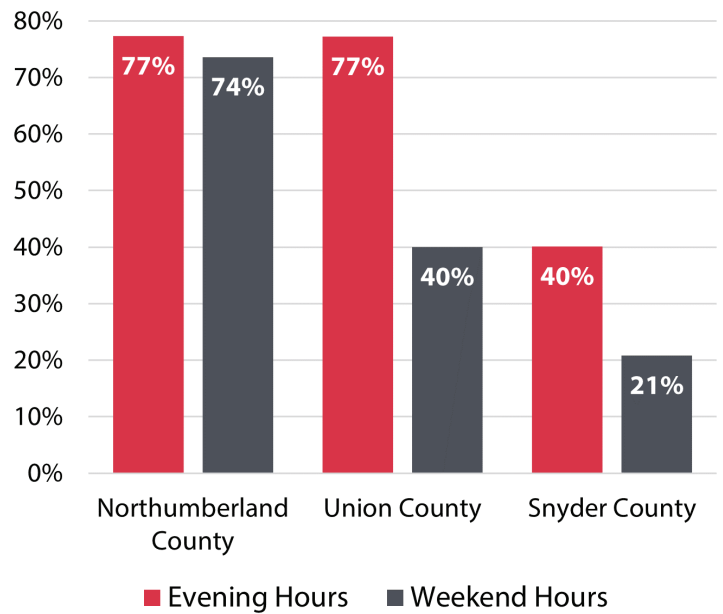


Another component of access is the frequency with which pantries with evening or weekend hours are open during a month. The figure above shows the percentage of the food insecure population in the SUN region that has access to weekend or evening pantries based on the frequency of distribution. The frequencies of distribution are inclusive, so “Monthly Distributions” include distributions that distribute at minimum once a month, including distributions that occur twice a month, weekly, or even daily. The vast majority (70.2%) of SUN region neighbors experiencing food insecurity have access to pantries with evening hours on a monthly and bi-monthly basis. However, this number drops down to just 36.7% at the weekly level of distributions.

Just over half (58.3%) of SUN region neighbors experiencing food insecurity have access to monthly weekend distributions. There is no access to pantries with weekend hours at the bi-monthly or weekly levels of distributions. Overall, these findings indicate that neighbors may have limited access to evening hours and inconsistent access to weekend hours in the SUN counties; therefore, expanding hours across the region is likely to increase overall pantry access substantially.

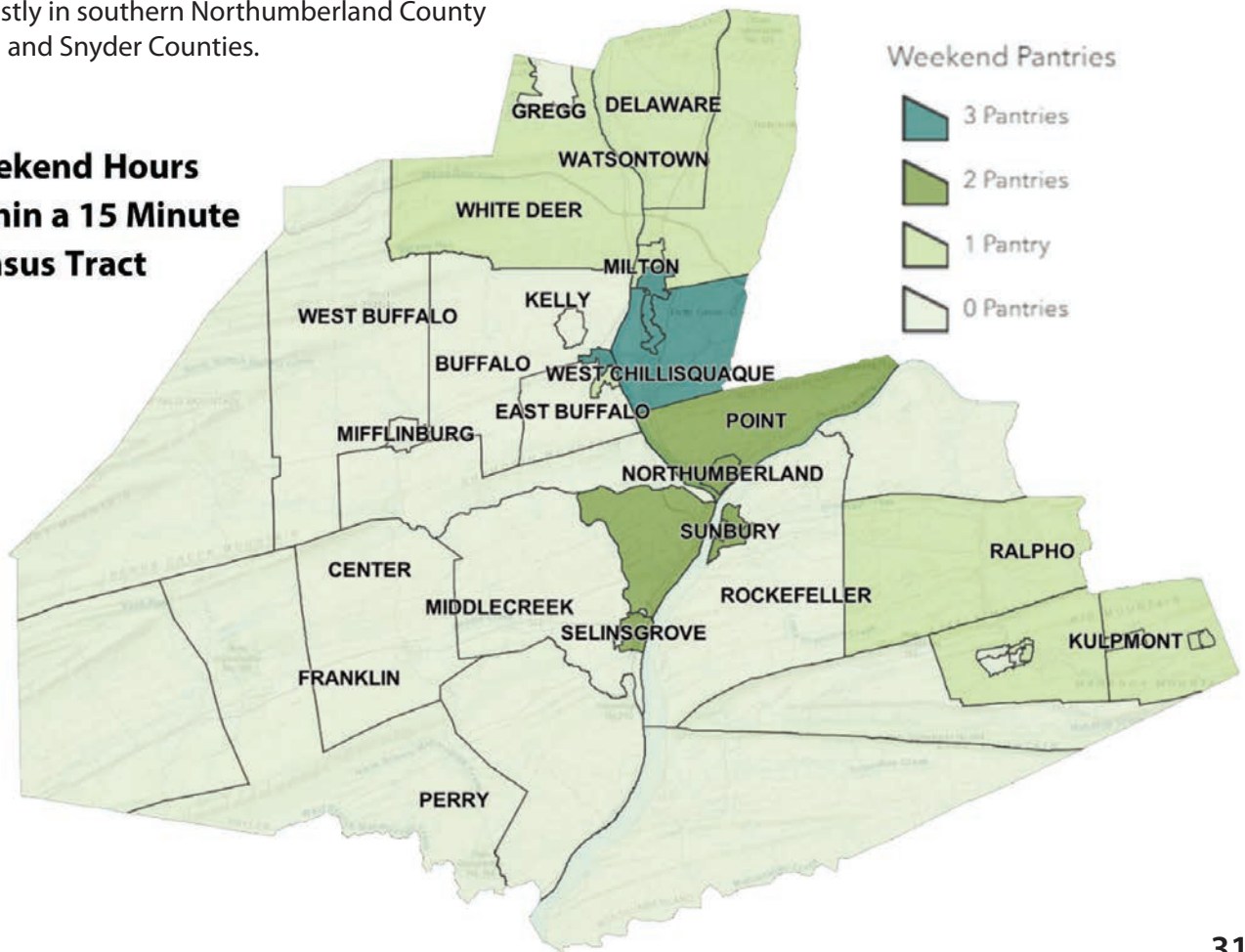
The map below shows census tracts by their access to weekend pantries within a 15-minute drive radius. Notably, the lightest census tracts, which have zero weekend pantries within their 15-minute drive radius, heavily outnumber the rest of the census tracts and are concentrated mostly in southern Northumberland County or western Union and Snyder Counties.

Food Insecure Population with Weekend and Evening Access by County

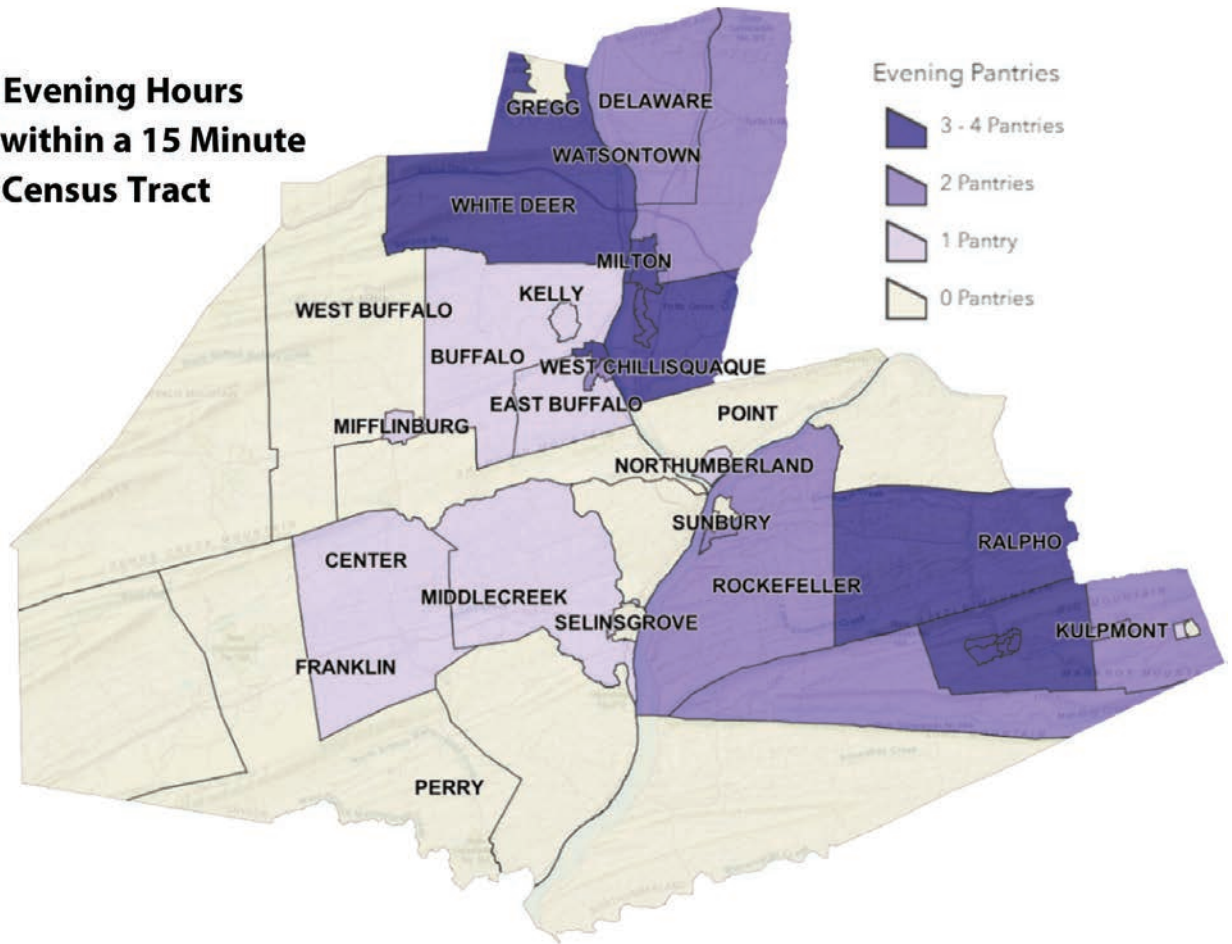


Of the SUN region pantries who participated in the partner surveys, only four have weekend hours; all four of these pantries are located within Northumberland County. The census tracts with the most access to weekend pantries are concentrated along the river and mostly lie south of Milton.

Monthly Weekend Hours Pantries within a 15 Minute Drive by Census Tract



Monthly Evening Hours Pantries within a 15 Minute Drive by Census Tract



There is noticeably more access to evening pantries by census tract compared to weekend pantries across the SUN region in Union and Snyder Counties.

The census tracts that have no local access to evening pantries and are mostly found in the western part of Union and Snyder counties and in the middle part of Northumberland County. Although evening access is more abundant than weekend access, Union and Snyder counties still show limitations in this area.

PANTRY VOLUNTEER AND STAFF TREATMENT

Among pantry visitors, households with children were four times more likely to report feeling judged at a food pantry than households without children. Seniors were the least likely to report feeling judged by staff or volunteers in the pantry.

Differential feelings of judgment by household type may have an impact on the willingness of households with children to return to the food pantry as frequently as they would otherwise. One survey respondent said her kids pleaded with her to stop visiting the food pantry after a negative interaction with a volunteer. Literature on the experience of families with children at food pantries suggest that parents work hard to protect their children from experiencing the impact of low food security,¹¹ which might include shielding them from negative experiences at pantries by not bringing them along or avoiding the charitable food network altogether.

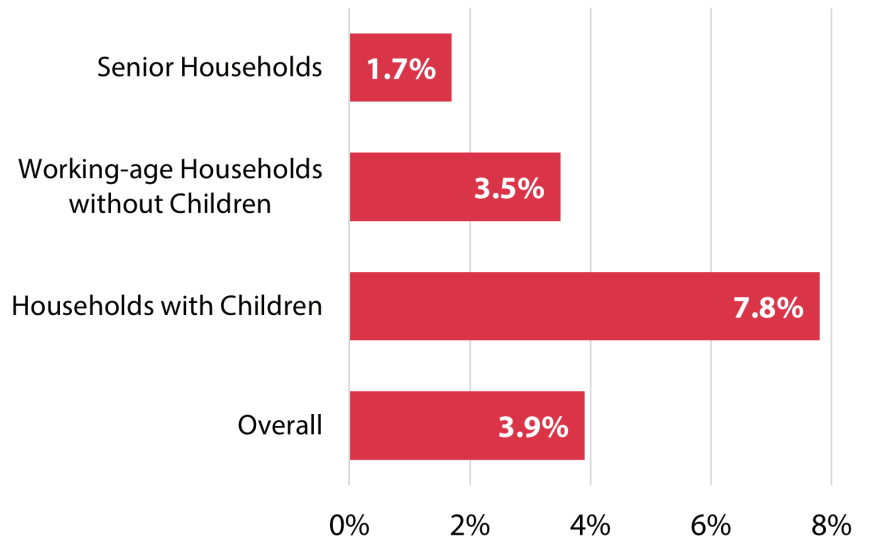
As mentioned previously, survey results for SUN indicate that households with children visit the charitable food system much less frequently than working-age households without children and senior households, with 46% of households with children visiting a food pantry one to eight times in the last year compared to just 18% of senior households.

Hispanic pantry visitors were twice as likely as white pantry visitors to feel judged by pantry staff or volunteers, with 8% of Hispanic pantry visitors feeling judged compared to 4% of the general population. Through interviews and survey observations, Hispanic households were more likely to report feel judged by other food pantry visitors, which can create an uncomfortable and distracting pantry visit for all individuals involved and may affect households' willingness to return.

Hispanic households also visit food pantries less frequently than white, non-Hispanic households in the SUN region. A quarter of Hispanic households (26%) visited a food pantry one to two times in the last year and only 20% visited food pantries more than twelve times in the last year. This is in comparison to 10% of the total food pantry visitor population who visited food pantries one to two times in the last year and 41% who visited food pantries more than a dozen times in the last year.

All pantry visitors should feel safe and welcome when accessing pantry services, without anticipating poor treatment or stigmatization. In the SUN counties, neighbors who visit food pantries and those who have shown interest in food pantry services through non-food pantry surveys have expressed reluctance about the process. Many said that they feel embarrassed about seeking help or have an aversion to being recognized by peers.

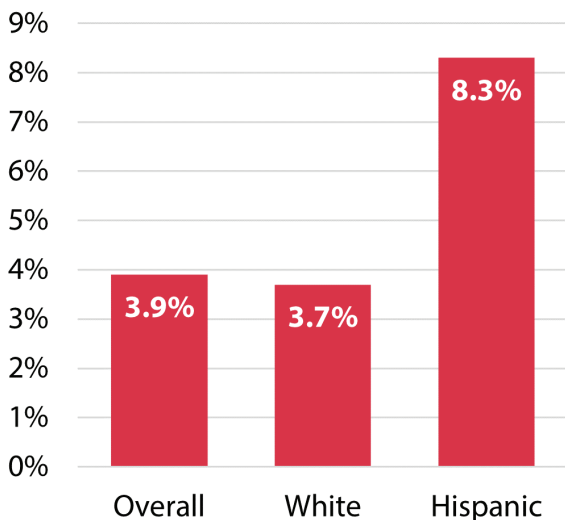
Percent of Respondents Reporting Feeling Judged by Household Type in SUN Counties



When asked about the amount of food they receive and are later unable to use ("food waste"), neighbors overwhelmingly noted that they only take what they need and make efforts to share what they cannot use with others in need, rather than letting food go to waste. Neighbors expressed concern for others who "might need it [the food] more" and cited this as a reason for not applying for government benefits such as SNAP. These sentiments show great care for other community members but may also indicate a lack of public knowledge regarding eligibility for services. This represents a missed opportunity for individuals needing assistance who do not know who such services are "for."

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

Percent of Respondents Reporting Feeling Judged by Race/Ethnicity in SUN Counties



"I wouldn't have come here if it wasn't for my son. I said I'd feel very small, but he said I wouldn't, and I didn't. I thought people would look at me and say she doesn't belong here, but they were all very kind."

–Survey Participant

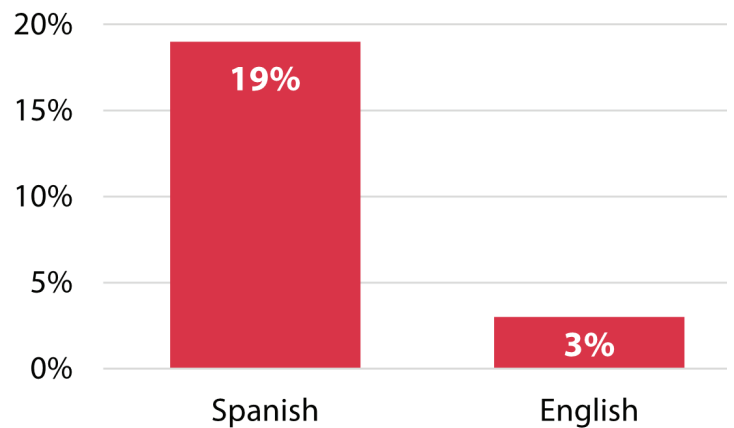


LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY AT PANTRIES

Language barriers between neighbors who utilize the charitable food system and the staff and volunteers at pantries appear to contribute heavily to the reported feelings of judgment experienced by neighbors. A staggering 19% of food pantry visitors who took the surveys in Spanish described feeling judged at a food pantry, compared to only 3% of those who took the survey in English. Households who took the survey in Spanish made up 45% of Hispanic households who took the survey. The very low food security rate for these households is a staggering 69%.

These high reported feelings of judgment are likely due, in part, to the pantry experience being confusing for Spanish-speaking households when there are no Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers available. Pantry staff, volunteers, and neighbors all expressed frustration with the difficulty of communicating essential information about pantry procedures through a language barrier. Harsh reactions by pantry volunteers and English-speaking neighbors when Spanish-speaking neighbors do not understand pantry rules, which vary from pantry to pantry, can exacerbate feelings of judgment.

Reported Feelings of Judgment by Survey Language



Translated materials and grace for households whose first language is not English are needed to reduce feelings of judgment. All neighbors must be set up to have a successful and easily navigable pantry experience. Having translated signs indicating pantry procedures and the number of items that can be chosen from a shelf can prevent confusion for everyone in the food pantry.

Pantries can and should work to increase the number of Spanish-speaking volunteers by communicating the need with the wider community and recruiting through local institutions like businesses, colleges and high schools, Spanish-speaking church congregations, and neighborhood social media platforms. Pantries who make these efforts will likely find potential points of conflict are reduced for both volunteers and neighbors, which leads to a better experience during the pantry distribution.

Because pantries are a low barrier social service access point¹² and regular use of food pantries reduces very low food security in the SUN region, a key component of reducing the high rate of very low food security among Spanish-speaking neighbors is the creation of an inclusive and welcoming environment at the pantries they visit.

CULTURALLY FAMILIAR FOODS AND ANCESTRY ANALYSIS

Another component of access is the availability of foods that are relevant to the people accessing the charitable food system. Nearly two thirds (63%) of all food pantry visitor households in the SUN region said that they “always” or “often” receive foods they want from the food pantry.

However, there are significant differences by race and ethnicity. Just 42% of Hispanic households said that they “always” or “often” receive foods they like from the pantry compared to 61% of white households. Unfortunately, there was not enough data to break down the results by race/ethnicity. The results showing that Hispanic households are less likely to receive foods they like from the food pantry are not unique to the SUN counties,¹³ but they still indicate there is room for improvement in offering culturally familiar foods.

Improving culturally familiar food offerings is necessary because Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties, like the rest of the United States, are becoming increasingly diverse – the region’s Hispanic population nearly doubled between the 2010 and 2020 Census, and the Black and Asian populations both increased by about a third – and because members of historically marginalized groups disproportionately likely to be food insecure.¹⁴ This section intends to assist in this work 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 as a gateway toward work on topics like culturally relevant food sourcing and cultural competency within the charitable food network.

It is essential to note that Hispanic populations, and all racial and ethnic groups, are not a monolith, and culinary preferences differ by nationality. To give the charitable food network some of the information it needs to begin adjusting food pantry offerings and procurement to fit the preferences of the cultures represented in the population, this analysis examines the different national ancestries in the SUN counties using data from the 2020 5-Year ACS.

The table below shows the seven largest non-Western European nationality groups in the SUN region that have foreign-born rates of more than 15%, plus Puerto Rico. Puerto Rican individuals comprise the largest non-Western European ancestry group in the region by far, at about 3,100 individuals, or 1.8% of the tri-county population. No nationality group breaks more than one percent of the regional population, although there are more than 500 individuals in the SUN counties from Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

SUN Region Ancestry Analysis				
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Number With Ancestry</i>	<i>Number Foreign Born</i>	<i>Percent Foreign Born</i>
1	Puerto Rico	3,158	N/A	N/A
2	Mexico	1,266	192	15.2%
3	Dominican Republic	617	462	74.9%
4	China, Except Taiwan	365	270	74.0%
5	Vietnam	291	240	82.5%
6	India	248	152	61.3%
7	Colombia	237	136	57.4%
8	Korea	163	108	66.3%
9	Guatemala	147	23	15.6%
10	Pakistan	113	69	61.1%

Neighbor survey results lacked sufficient respondents that identified as being from a specific culture outside of the mainland United States like Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic to be able to determine differential food preferences by culture, although existing resources such as the food preferences list developed by Food Bank of the Rockies may be helpful to pantries looking to improve their culturally familiar food offerings.¹⁵

Geographic Dispersion of Different Ancestry Groups

People from different ancestry groups are not evenly distributed across Snyder, Union, and Northumberland counties. This section will discuss areas in which the seven most common non-Western European ancestry groups were concentrated as of the 2020 5-Year ACS.

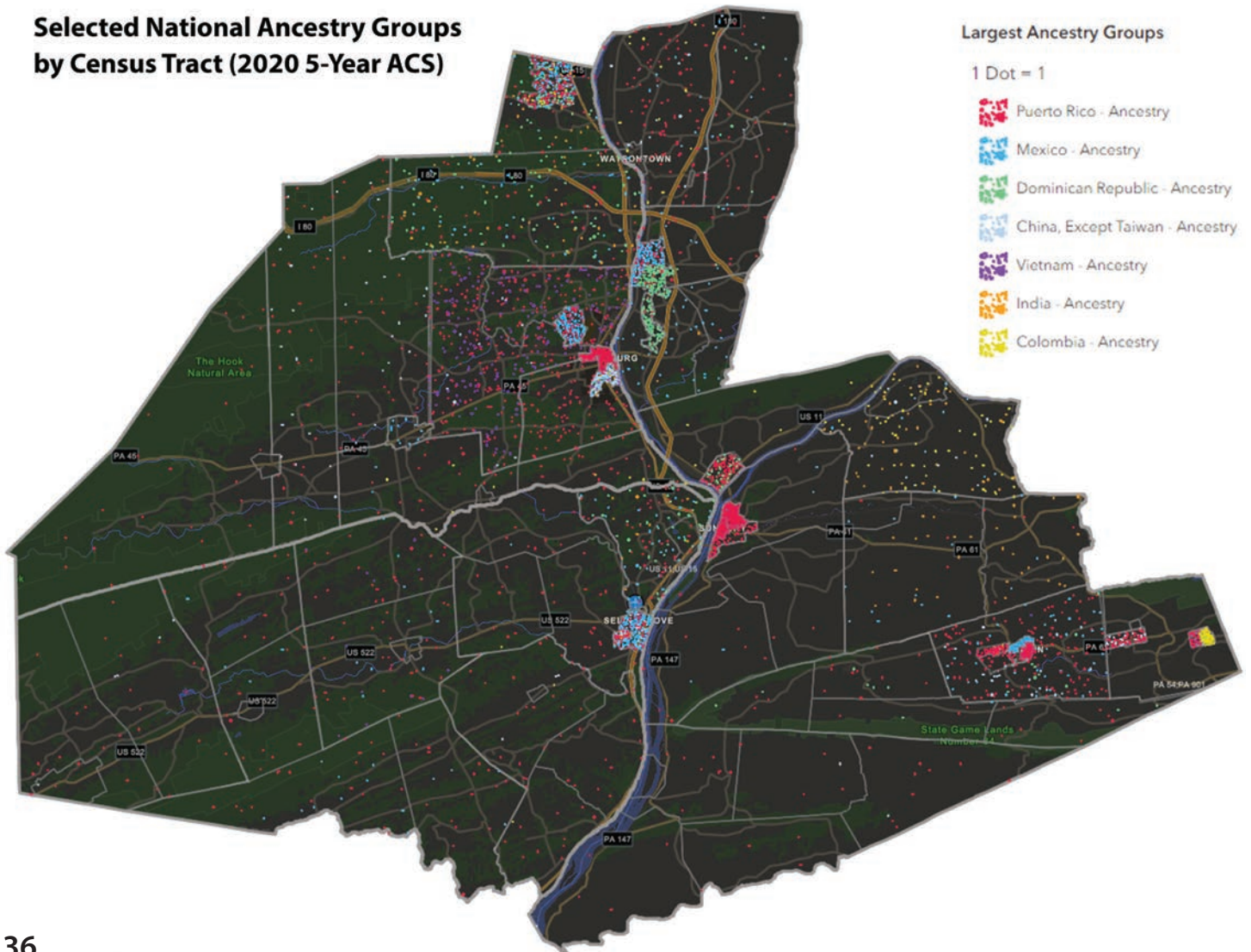
The map of the SUN region below uses a plotting method in which one dot represents one individual residing in a census tract and each color signifies a different ancestry group, showing both the relative sizes and densities of the seven largest non-Western European ancestry groups living in any specific area.

Like the general population distribution of the region, neighbors with non-Western European ancestry mostly live in more urbanized areas, such as Selinsgrove, Lewisburg, Milton, Sunbury, Shamokin, and Mount Carmel, with less dense communities in the more rural areas of the region.

In Union County, the majority of non-Western European individuals live in and around Lewisburg. Within the borough, there is a clear divide between the north side of town, which is home to a sizable Puerto Rican community and the south side, which has the region's largest Chinese community. Bucknell University makes up most of this census tract, so it is likely that many of these individuals are students or otherwise associated with the college. As of 2022, 4.5% of Bucknell undergraduate students were Asian, though the data is not disaggregated by ancestry.¹⁶

Outside the borough, in the census tract covering most of Kelly Township and the entirety of Buffalo Township, resides by far the region's largest Vietnamese community, with more than 250 individuals, or more than 90% of the regional total. This census tract, along with the one covering East Buffalo Township to the south, is home to another 361 Puerto Rican individuals, who together account for just over 11% of the regional Puerto Rican community.

Selected National Ancestry Groups by Census Tract (2020 5-Year ACS)





It is important to note there are two census tracts in Union County that contain federal penitentiaries, as they have unique demographic characteristics. USP Allenwood is in the far northern part of the county in Gregg Township, and FCI Lewisburg is just outside Lewisburg in Kelly Township. Based on 2020 5-Year ACS reporting on individuals who live in 'group quarters', these two census tracts' populations total to just under 5,000 individuals, or about 11% of the county's overall population, and the population is overwhelmingly (99.6%) composed of incarcerated individuals. As shown in the map on the previous page, these two tracts contain more individuals with non-Western European ancestry than those surrounding them.

In Snyder County, the overall patterns are similar, with the largest number of individuals with non-Western European ancestry residing in Selinsgrove. In the borough, the Mexican community is the largest. There is also a visible Puerto Rican community in the area.

In Northumberland County, there are several different population centers. In Milton, there is a sizable Mexican community on the north side of the borough, while the south side is predominantly Dominican. Nearly half of the Dominican population in the SUN counties lives in the southern side of Milton. Sunbury and Northumberland boroughs are both home to Puerto Rican communities, with Sunbury's being one of the region's largest at more than 500 individuals. Shamokin, Kulpmont, and Mount Carmel are predominantly Puerto Rican as well; Shamokin has a notable Mexican community in the north side of the borough and Mount Carmel has the region's densest Colombian community on the east side of the borough at over 100 individuals, or nearly half of the regional total.

WAIT TIMES AND FOOD PANTRY SETTING

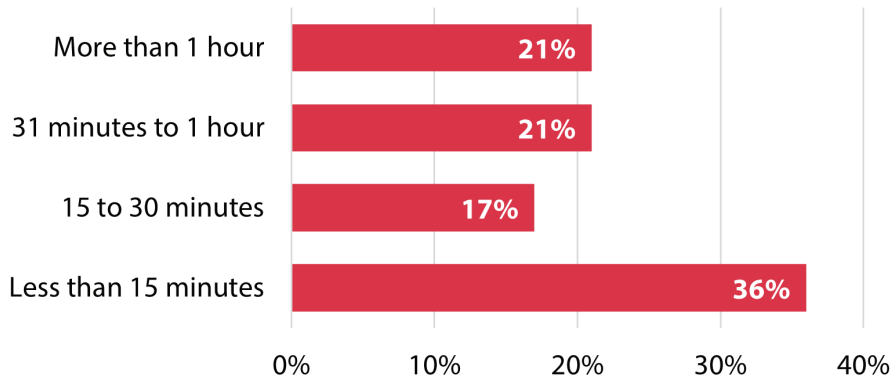
Neighbors who visit food pantries in the SUN region express gratitude for the predictable availability of fresh foods and pantry staples when they visit food pantries in the region. However, some neighbors devote a major portion of their day to pantry visits as a result of the complicated intersection of transportation challenges, past experiences with pantry services, and differing availability of the variety and quantity of foods available at certain pantries at the beginning and end of a distribution.

Wait Times

Pantry visitor surveys asked neighbors to describe the length of a visit to the pantry, starting with the time of arrival and ending with when the food is received by the neighbor and they depart the pantry. Survey results show that more than 20% of food pantry visitors wait longer than an hour to receive food once they arrive at a distribution. This rate is more than double than other counties in central Pennsylvania.^{17,18}

More than a fifth of households (21%) reported waiting more than an hour for food at a pantry across the SUN region, although wait times vary greatly by specific agency. Some pantries have more than 60% of neighbors who wait longer than one hour to receive food at their distribution, while other pantries have the inverse, with more than 60% waiting less than 15 minutes.

Number of Minutes Until Food Services Were Completed After Arriving at the Pantry



“They probably need to get a bigger space because they can only take so many people inside where they’re serving right now. If I didn’t have a vehicle, it would be bad. I have seen people standing outside in the cold wanting to go in because they don’t take so many at a time.”

–Interview Participant

In partner listening sessions, some pantries expressed exasperation about the situation; most pantries do not have enough volunteer coverage to open “early” or indoor space where neighbors could gather prior to the distribution. For pantries operating a drive-through model, management of the parking lot and public streets creates additional logistical concerns, as well as challenges to ensure the safety of neighbors arriving on foot.

Pantries with shorter wait times and neighbors who arrive at the start of the distribution, rather than hours beforehand, cited the consistency of pantry offerings as a major factor in eliminating long lines for neighbors. One pantry in Northumberland County noted that their offerings have remained consistent for “a few years,” and that time has built trust that pantry offerings would be similar at the beginning and end of their particular distribution.

Pantry visitors notice changes in what food is offered from the start to the end of a pantry distribution and are reluctant to risk “missing out” on priority items like milk, eggs, and meat. “If you’re there early, you got all the stuff to choose from it become later is not as much to choose,” an interview participant said. “(You also get) first choice to pick out what you want and not have to worry about being left with bad fruit.”

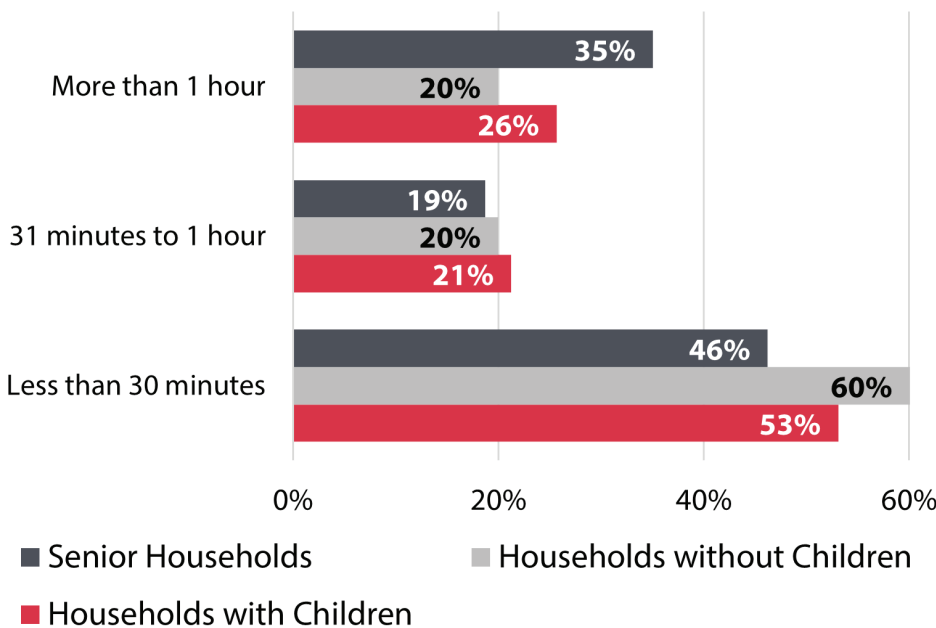
Although pantries did not report running out of food and take pride in always having something to offer their community, neighbors experience a lighter-than-usual bag of groceries with a great deal of anxiety, as many face very low food security regularly and many visit a pantry to offset costs they must spend on other necessities like shelter and transportation. Because pantry logistics such as sourcing and storing food are largely invisible to non-volunteers, these legitimate capacity limitations are not understood by neighbors and can be a source of tension and confusion during a distribution.



Increased frequency of pantry opening times and expanding the number of hours a pantry is open during a week can help alleviate some of these struggles for both neighbors and pantry volunteers. Testing and evaluating new strategies could have major positive impacts on the amount of time people wait for services over time.

In the SUN region, there are major disparities in the times with which people in various household types have available to wait. Senior households and households who are not working were much more able to wait for long periods of time prior to the opening of a food distribution. For instance, more than 35% of senior households reported waiting longer than an hour for food compared to 26% and 20% of households with children and working-age households without children, respectively.

Reported Wait Time by Household Type



Just 10% of households who said they are working full-time indicated waiting longer than an hour to receive food. This can often mean that food pantry visitors who work or have other obligations may receive less or less desirable food than households who are able to wait longer, simply because they are not able to arrive to the pantry earlier.

Long lines and extended wait times can be dangerous for senior households, even if they are able to wait longer than other households. This is particularly the case if households wait outside in the cold or hot weather. Although many food pantry distributions in the SUN counties are based on drive-through models, some have visits from households who walk. In this case, pantries should, wherever possible, allow pantry visitors to wait inside the pantry in a safe place before the pantry opens.

TRANSPORTATION

Most food pantry visitors in the SUN region reported that they drive themselves (76%) or catch rides with friends or family (15%) as their primary form of transportation. In a pantry context, it is important to note that four of the eight survey sites were drive-through locations, meaning that individuals must have had access to a car or another individual with a car to reach many food pantries. It is unclear, then, how many individuals may not have attended some of these food pantries because they did not have access to a car.

Five interview participants shared that they rely on others for rides to their food pantries. Without access to a ride on a given week, some added, they do not pick up food. One middle-aged pantry visitor from Northumberland County said she rides with coworkers to pick up food after work, sometimes arriving when their pantry distribution is just about to end. When no coworker or neighbor can drive her, she walks one hour roundtrip to her local pantry. She would attend a second food pantry, she shared, if she was able to make the 45-minute drive in time after work. The difficulty of transportation and potential long drives after work again point to the importance of extending hours of operation into the evening.

At a county level, 83% of pantry visitors reported driving themselves in Snyder and 82% in Union, compared to 65% of pantry visitors in Northumberland. Pantry visitors who carpool with friends or family to reach their pantries included 13% of individuals in Snyder and Union and 18% of individuals in Northumberland. Nearly 11% of pantry visitors in Northumberland said that they bike or walk to their pantries, compared to 1% in Snyder and 4% in Union. Public transportation is not commonly used among food pantry visitors in the SUN counties.



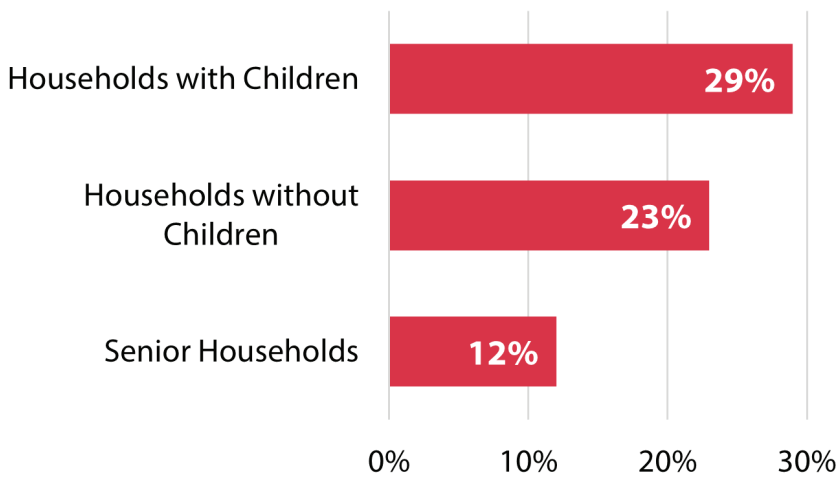
15% of pantry visitors carpool with friends or family to reach their food pantry.



20% of pantry visitors have had to pay for gas or public transportation instead of food.

High costs associated with transportation or gas for a car prevent neighbors from buying their own foods. Across SUN, 20% of food pantry visitors identified gas or transportation as a major economic trade-off, meaning they have had to choose between paying for it in place of food in the last twelve months. “I can’t go without my car,” many neighbors commented when taking surveys. Car loans or payments, inspections, and major repairs are other issues neighbors have shared as significant cost burdens in place of food. These tradeoffs increase to 29% of households with children who faced this choice and 23% of households without children compared to 12% of senior households. Pantry visitors reported that they believe “transportation for people to access resources is highly lacking.”

Reported Economic Tradeoffs with Transportation



“I know that meats are expensive but having some main dishes like meats goes a long way when you have all the sides just no main dish so to speak.”

–Survey Participant

Time is another cost for pantry visitors who drive long distances to reach their food pantries. A quarter of food pantry visitors who drive between 31 minutes and an hour to reach their food pantry noted having trouble accessing their food pantry because of the cost of gas or transit fare. While taking surveys, neighbors shared they arrive hours early to their distribution instead of driving home after appointments or other errands to save gas and time driving back home. This is the primary reason why some pantry visitors might shape their days around accessing a food pantry.

FOOD OFFERINGS

In pantry visitor surveys, neighbors were asked to identify two to three food items they want but cannot always find at their food pantry. A third of all respondents responded that meat is a food they want but cannot always find at their food pantry. Many neighbors cited high prices for meat at grocery stores as a primary reason behind this request. Other commonly requested items included produce (fresh fruits and vegetables), as well as milk, eggs, and bread.

Neighbors frequently requested health-friendly foods. This request was common among the many respondents who have one or more dietary health conditions in their household, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, or kidney disease.

Hispanic neighbors reported the same top five food preferences as the general population, except for bread. Instead, Hispanic households said rice is one of the top five foods that they want but cannot always find at food pantries in the region. In a post-survey debrief, one CPFEB researcher wrote that she, “spoke to a Puerto Rican woman who said ‘rice’ before I could even fully finish the ‘what food do you want but don’t always get’ question,” indicating the significance of rice and strength of the preference for it among at least some Hispanic households.

Many survey respondents and interview participants shared disappointment in some foods they have received that were expired. “One time I stopped here and they had moldy grapes and I thought it was senseless to give those out because they were disgusting,” a survey participant commented about their food pantry.

Repeatedly receiving spoiled foods can seriously harm a neighbor’s trust in a food pantry to deliver foods they can eat and perpetuate existing stigmas about food pantry offerings and how “deserving” poor people are of quality services.

Pantry Visitor Food Preferences for Items Not Always Available

Rank	Product Category	Percentage of Survey Respondents
1	Meat	33%
2	Produce (including fruits and vegetables)	24%
3	Milk	12%
4	Eggs	8%
5	Bread	5%

Neighbors may need specific accommodations depending on their housing situation, such as if they are or become marginally housed, unhoused, or are without access to a major kitchen appliance. It is good practice to occasionally check in with neighbors to ensure they can prepare the foods they are receiving and to have flexible policies for swapping or substituting foods if not.

Food offerings should also match the size of the household being served. According to partner surveys, 65% of pantries in the SUN region offer more product to larger households. Providing more foods for households larger than a few people ensures that the food households receive lasts as long as its intended time.

PARTNER EXPERIENCE AND FOOD SOURCING

During partner listening sessions, partners almost unanimously stated concerns about funding and food sourcing opportunities, citing a shortage of both resources. Tight spending budgets have led partners to make difficult decisions about the quantity and types of foods offered. Two partners shared that they have turned to offering less food per family to meet the high demand under such difficult constraints.

The foods that partners identified having most trouble sourcing closely match food offerings neighbors request the most: meat, produce, milk, eggs, and bread. For pantries, donations of funds and food are down, while the cost to acquire food is up, and grant resources like the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and other programs have been level funded or provide a smaller quantity of food than in the past. The result of these combined factors is that the partner-level experience of resource constraints mirrors the constraints experienced at the neighbor-level. Agencies must make hard decisions on products and quantities to source and do all they can stretch a limited budget on products that are increasingly expensive.

Partners identified different strategies for providing foods to their neighbors within their limited resources, including substituting protein options by offering beans in place of meat or having canned meats as back-up products when their budgets do not allow for ordering frozen meat on any given week. One partner said they alternate between highly requested products at times, giving milk out one week and eggs on the other one.

Constraints such as limited refrigerator space and food delivery times impact the types of foods that partners can or want to order for their neighbors. Many partners base their distribution day off the day and time they get their deliveries from the food bank. Without much refrigerator space, they are unable to store their foods for extended periods of time, so the food they give out is largely food they received by delivery that day. Partners noted receiving spoiled foods from food banks and other suppliers, like retailers or donors, which can come from many distribution points within the food system. It is critical that the foods being delivered to agencies are in the best conditions for consumption to adequately serve neighbors with nutritious and dignifying foods.



Multiple agencies also expressed a lack of reliable and skilled volunteers, which has the potential to lead to burn out for existing volunteers and have a negative impact on the pantry experience for neighbors and pantry volunteers or staff alike. Partners in SUN successfully recruited volunteers through faith groups, local high school and college organizations, and social media and other neighborhood platforms. Partners could reach volunteer pools through local businesses and social organizations in their area.

Barriers to Accessing Food Pantry Services for Current Non-Participants

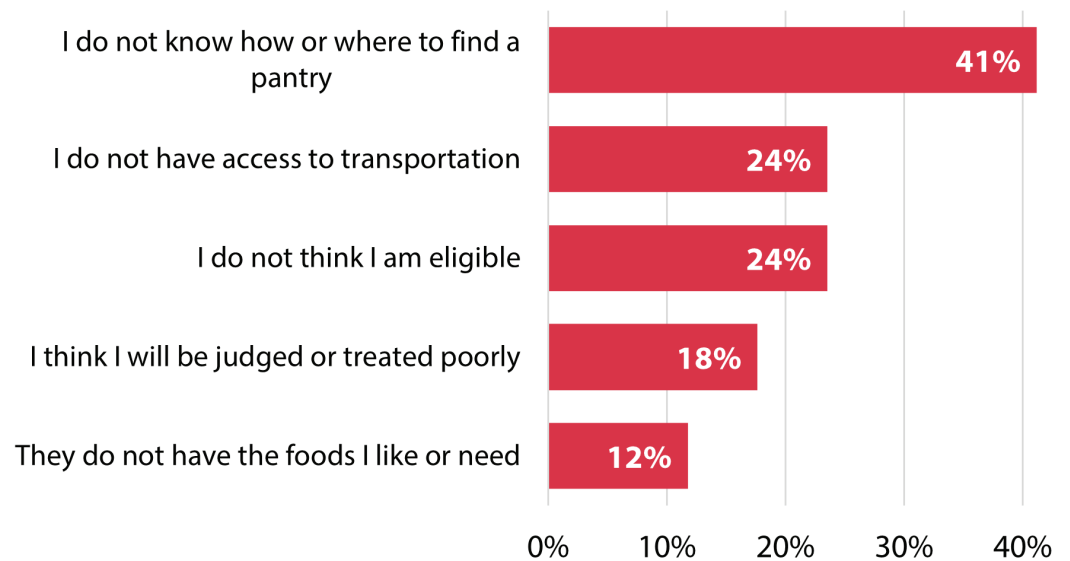
Non-food pantry visitor surveys help identify potential barriers to accessing food pantries by collecting feedback from individuals who might need food pantry services and do not visit a pantry. Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at libraries across the SUN region, and results show that the most significant barrier to accessing food pantries among those who have not used them before is lack of information about available services.

More than 40% of people who screened as food insecure but not currently visiting a food pantry said they did not use a food pantry because they did not know how or where to find one.

Amplifying the promotion of food pantry services through varied outlets such as newspapers, newsletters, social media posts, and school messaging can help ensure that households that need food pantry services are able to reach them.

Greater promotion of services is especially pertinent in the SUN counties, where many individuals shared that news travels by word-of-mouth. As a result, one partner pointed out during a listening session that families who are new to the area or who are less integrated in the community might miss critical information about events and resources. Through interviews with pantry visitors, it became apparent that many began visiting food pantries when a friend or neighbor began taking them. When conducting awareness raising activities, it is important to advertise that everyone who needs help is eligible to receive privately funded (donated and non-TEFAP or SFPP) food so as to reduce the perception of income eligibility as a barrier.

Percent of Food Insecure Non-Food Pantry Respondents Who Report Select Barriers to Food Pantry Access



Transportation and belief of ineligibility are major barriers to accessing food pantry services for non-pantry respondents. For transportation, some respondents no longer have access to a pantry because their car broke down or they totaled their car and now have no way to physically visit charitable food providers. Another reported that the food pantry moved out of their area. These results show the benefits of having some mobile pantry options, including potential partnerships with libraries or other health locations, which could help expand access to people who cannot get to a pantry.

Anticipation of poor treatment or receiving undesirable foods are other notable barriers towards accessing food pantries; both responses reflect stigmas or previous negative experiences when visiting a food pantry.

Two individuals noted in the comments of the non-food pantry survey that the lack of anonymity keeps them from utilizing services. "It stopped being anonymous, more complicated to access," one survey participant wrote. Pantries should inform neighbors which questions are optional and which are not at intake, which allows individuals to retain control over their information and anonymity if desired.



Charitable Food Access Main Findings and Recommendations

Section 2 Finding 1: The work of the charitable food system in the SUN counties significantly reduces very low food security among food pantry visitors

Households with incomes below the federal poverty level who have visited charitable food providers more than twelve times in the last year have very low food security rates that are 30% lower than households with incomes below the federal poverty line who visit a dozen times or fewer. Pantry visitors who came fewer than twelve times told researchers that they wish they had learned about pantry services earlier or that they face a variety of challenges that make it difficult to visit more frequently.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should work collaboratively to increase access and lower barriers to food pantries to people who need it in the SUN region because charitable food access demonstrably reduces very low food security. Furthermore, the charitable food system should use very low food security as a main measure of success for its work.

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Section 2 Finding 2: Households with children utilize the charitable food system less than expected given that they make up a sizable share of households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty level. In addition, service frequency varies by household type within the pantry visitor population. Households with children, Hispanic households, and working-age households without children visit less often than do senior households.

These disparities in utilization are the result of charitable food system access barriers that disproportionately impact these household types. These barriers include limited hours of operation during evenings and weekends, increased reported feelings of judgment, language accessibility issues, and wait times and long lines. These barriers are compounding and intersectional; access is limited for Hispanic households with children, for example.

Households with children and Hispanic households face the highest rates of very low food security among pantry visitors. Households with children have very low food security rates of 47% and Hispanic households face very low food security rates of 64%, compared to an overall rate of 34% among pantry visitors.

Recommendation: It is important for the charitable food system in the SUN counties to focus on making sure food pantries are as accessible as possible to all people, with emphasis on increasing accessibility for households with children and Hispanic households. These households face hunger at a disproportionate rate but do not use the charitable food system due to systemic access barriers.

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Section 2 Finding 3: Pantry access during evening and weekend hours is limited across much of the SUN region, as 70% of food insecure individuals have access to an evening distribution and 58% have access to a weekend distribution.

There are differences by county, as Snyder County has the least access to off-hours distributions, with 40% and 21% of food insecure individuals having access to evening and weekend hours, respectively. Off-hours distributions are also relatively infrequent across the region. Pantry visitors cite opening times as a barrier for them and for friends who would like to attend but are unable to given current hours of operation.

Recommendation: Pantries should work to increase access to their locations during evenings and weekends to increase availability for households who work. There is room for increased access to weekend hours in Snyder, Union, and the southern half of Northumberland County, as well as in western Union, around Selinsgrove in Snyder, and in the middle and southern portions of Northumberland County. Increasing hours of operation will likely reduce pantry utilization gaps among households with children and Hispanic households. If pantries are open additional hours, this should help relieve the pressure of long lines and wait times that many pantries face.



Section 2 Finding 4: Households with children and Hispanic households are twice as likely to indicate feeling judged while at a food pantry than the overall population. Nearly 8% of households with children and Hispanic households reported feeling judged compared to 3.5% of working-age households with children, 2% of senior households, and 4% of white, non-Hispanic households.

Recommendation: The charitable food system in the SUN region and food pantries should institute policies and training programs to promote positive interactions between pantry visitors and staff or volunteers, with a specific emphasis placed on treatment of Hispanic households and households with children. Poor treatment by staff and volunteers or from one neighbor to another should not be tolerated. Simplifying pantry rules can reduce the potential for negative interactions and unnecessary policing opportunities for staff and volunteers with neighbors.



Section 2 Finding 5: Language barriers, particularly for Spanish speakers, are a major reason for higher feelings of judgment experienced by neighbors. Fully 19% of food pantry visitors who took the surveys in Spanish reported feeling judged at a food pantry, compared to only 3% of pantry visitors who took the survey in English.

Recommendation: Food pantry materials should be translated for Spanish-speaking neighbors, and pantries should work to ensure that all staff and volunteers provide grace to pantry visitors who may not understand the pantry policies and rules, which can vary dramatically by location. The charitable food system coalition should assist pantries in developing these materials, as they can likely be used by multiple locations. Prioritizing recruitment of bilingual volunteers is another step toward creating a welcoming and dignifying experience for neighbors.



Section 2 Finding 6: More than one in five SUN region food pantry visitors wait longer than an hour to receive food after arriving at the pantry. This is twice the rate of wait times in other counties in Central Pennsylvania. Partners as well as neighbors express frustration with the issue, as many pantries have substantial logistical and capacity concerns that can make reducing wait times a tall order.

Recommendation: Pantries should experiment with several ways to shorten lines and wait times for pantry visitors. Increasing the number of times pantries are open during a week or a month can go a long way to reducing long lines and wait times at any given distribution.

Pantry visitors often aim to be first in line when the food is substantially different at the beginning and end of a distribution, or that there are highly desired items such as milk, eggs, or meat that are not available towards the end of a distribution. One pantry in the SUN region described long lines as a major problem in the past, but that they built trust over a long period of time that pantry food offerings would be the same regardless of arrival time, and they now have a very short wait and associated lines.



Section 2 Finding 7: The charitable food system in the SUN counties has many key strengths that contribute to its positive impact on reducing very low food security. These strengths include generally good geographic access across to pantries across most of the SUN region, a wide variety of pantry models including choice pantries and drive-thrus, a high likelihood of providing desired foods to pantry visitors, and overall positive experiences of neighbors at pantries.

Recommendation: The Union-Snyder Hunger Coalition and the corresponding Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Food Access team are a strong coalition for coordination and collaboration toward shared goals. Organizations like these who are invested in their communities are crucial supports for pantries seeking to improve services and implement new ideas.



Section 2 Finding 8: Lack of awareness of pantry locations and hours, transportation challenges, and beliefs about eligibility for food pantry services are the main barriers identified by food insecure individuals who do not currently utilize food pantries in the SUN region. People’s previous experiences with being treated poorly, fears of being judged, and perceptions that pantries will not have the foods they like or need are barriers to visiting charitable food providers.

Recommendation: The charitable food system coalition should work to promote awareness of food pantry services through a variety of different outlets, including at libraries, other community institutions, social media posts, newspapers, or school messaging. Clarity around hours of operation and eligibility requirements could encourage access as well.

It is important for pantries to ensure that people who are over the federal and state income threshold of 185% of the federal poverty line still have access to donated food. Improvements to neighbor experiences at pantries and increased availability of desired foods would encourage people who need assistance to use the charitable food system.



Section 2 Finding 9: Southern Snyder and Northumberland counties have the largest geographic access gaps in the region with more than 750 food insecure individuals who lack access to a nearby pantry.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should explore opportunities to increase access in these areas, potentially with a pop-up pantry or mobile distribution in southern Snyder and Northumberland counties.



Section 2 Finding 10: The top foods that survey respondents mentioned wanting at a food pantry but not always finding available are meat, produce, milk, eggs, and bread. Hispanic households are much less likely to have responded that pantries have the foods they like or need “often or always”, at 42% compared to 63% overall. The primary food Hispanic households report wanting to be available at a pantry is rice, along with meat, produce, milk, and eggs.

Recommendation: The charitable food system and potential food donors and partners should work collaboratively with pantries to supply the top requested foods by neighbors as much as possible. Specific items include meat, produce, milk, eggs, bread, and rice. Food pantries should have suggestion boxes available for people to provide feedback on what foods they would like to see. As they are able, pantries should offer short surveys asking for input about food offerings.



Section 2 Finding 11: Pantry managers cited major challenges around funding and food sourcing opportunities that make it hard for them provide sufficient foods to neighbors.

The foods that pantries identified as difficult to acquire match the items most often requested by neighbors: meat, produce, milk, eggs, and bread. Agencies face hard decisions for sourcing and work hard to stretch limited budgets to meet neighbors’ needs. Constraints, such as limited refrigerator space, delivery times, and when they are able to distribute food, impact the types of foods that partners can or want to order for their neighbors.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should continue to advocate for increased funding to key state and federal food assistance programs, including the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP), the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS), and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Funding to these programs has not kept pace with the increase in food insecurity and increased visits to the charitable food system.

The Hunger Coalition and its key members should continue to connect pantries to retail and farm sourcing opportunities. Stakeholders should invest in partner agencies and consider adjustments to delivery schedules that may help them expand their hours of operation and diversify food offerings.



SECTION 3: UTILIZATION OF KEY GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS IN THE SUN REGION

Government programs are perceived by many pantry visitors and food insecure individuals overall as difficult to navigate.¹⁹ Paperwork takes time, and necessary documentation may be difficult 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.

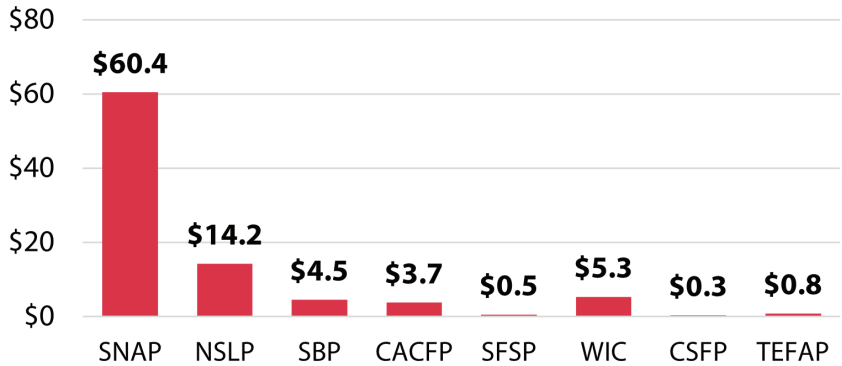
The charitable food system is just one piece of the effort needed to reduce food insecurity in the SUN counties. Several government programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), provide far more meals to families in need than the charitable food system. In fact, for every meal the charitable food system provides, SNAP provides nine.²⁰

The figure at right shows program expenditures in FY2019, which is the last full year before COVID-19 programmatic changes, and the closest approximation of likely spending proportions going forward. The eight largest programs and their corresponding expenditures are shown in the figure at right. SNAP outpaces all other programs, making it the most important food security support in the nation.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the next largest nutrition assistance program, while the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) rounds out the top three in terms of federal expenditures on permanent nutrition programs.²¹ Other, smaller, federally funded nutrition programs include the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

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.

FY2019 Program Expenditures (in Billions \$)



SNAP Participation

SNAP is by far the largest and most important nutrition assistance program in the United States and reduces very low food security significantly.²² SNAP is four times larger than NSLP, twelve times larger than WIC, and 80 times larger than TEFAP as of FY2019. Eligibility is determined by household size and income, with benefits made available via an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, which can be used to buy fresh and frozen foods at most grocery/supermarket retailers. Because EBT works like cash, recipients have the freedom to choose items that suit their cultural preferences, meet specific dietary needs, and budget spending over time. SNAP thus promotes dignity, autonomy, and choice, making it an especially well-designed program.

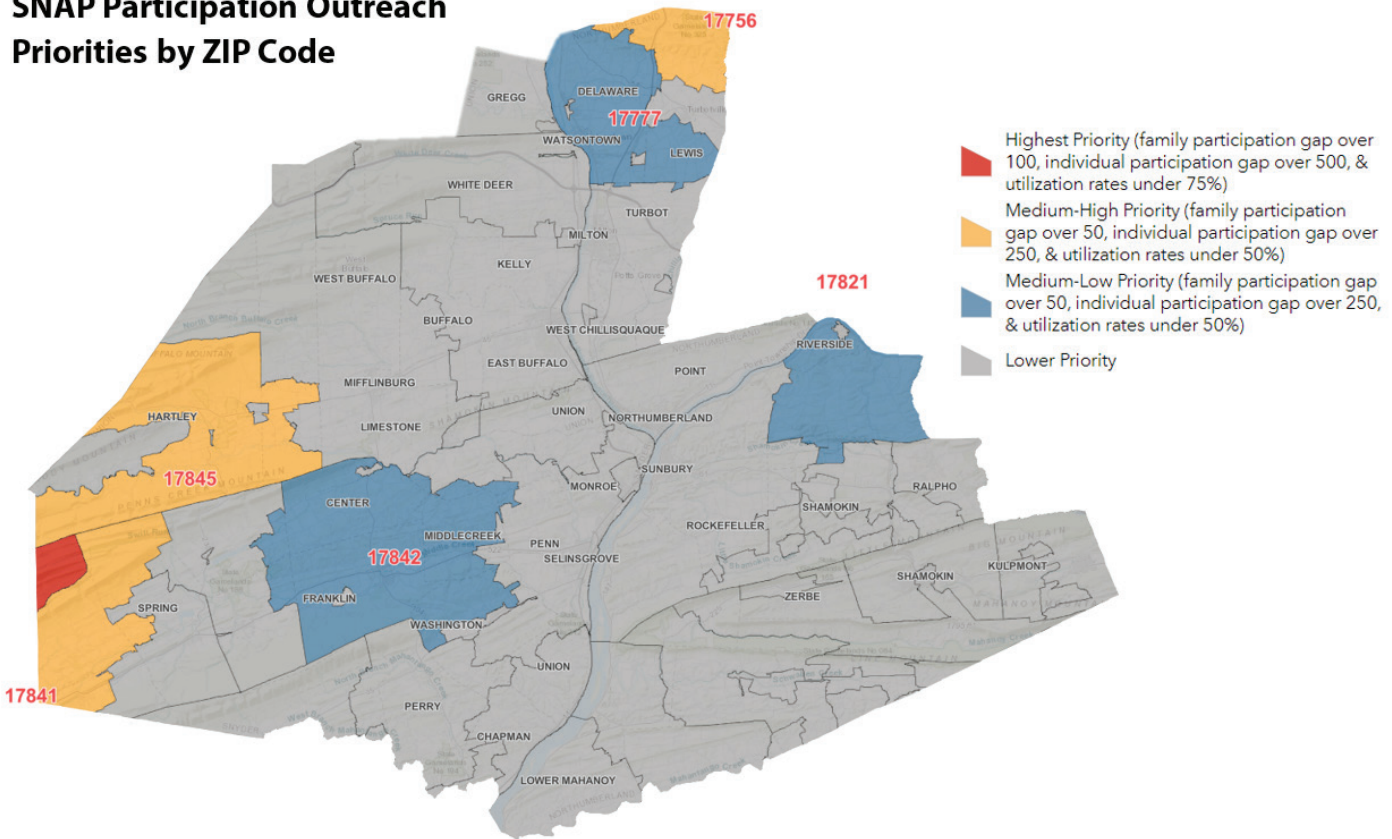
In the SUN counties, 25,750 individuals participated in SNAP as of April 2024 (14.8% of the population). This is a record high number of participants, and this success is driven primarily by Northumberland County, which exceeds both Snyder and Union counties in SNAP participation rates and statewide ranks. Northumberland County is ranked 6th in the state in overall SNAP participation while Union and Snyder are both ranked in the bottom ten. However, Union and Snyder both have notable college undergraduate populations which can reduce the likely eligible individual count and thereby underestimate participation rates.

SNAP participation in Snyder and Union counties has lagged other counties across the state since the Great Recession. Between 2013 and 2023, SNAP participation dropped 13.9% in Snyder County and 1.1% in Union County. In Northumberland, SNAP participation increased by 39.5%, which outpaced the increase of 11.2% for the state of Pennsylvania overall. Population change may account for the drop in SNAP participation seen in Union County (which fell in population by 5% between 2010 and 2020), but it does not account for the drop in SNAP participation seen in Snyder County (which grew 0.1% between 2010 and 2020). While Pennsylvania outperforms 42 other states in SNAP participation according to a recent USDA report,²³ there is room for improvement in SNAP participation on the west side of the SUN region, especially in Snyder County.

ZIP CODE SNAP PARTICIPATION ANALYSIS

Turning from a county-level analysis to a more detailed ZIP Code level analysis reveals that there are specific ZIP Codes in the SUN region where SNAP outreach may provide a greater return on investment. Specifically, this analysis uses Pennsylvania DHS data from October 2023 on individuals available at the ZIP Code level and combines it with ZIP Code-level likely-eligibility data for both individuals and families from the American Community Survey (ACS). The analysis then examines data from the ACS on likely family eligibility and family SNAP participation to calculate family SNAP participation rates and gap amounts. This analysis uses family as a unit rather than household because a family is defined as a household where two or more people are related by birth, marriage, or adoption; this method helps to exclude college students, who face stricter SNAP eligibility requirements.

SNAP Participation Outreach Priorities by ZIP Code



The results show that ZIP Codes 17841 (McClure) located partly in Snyder County, 17845 (Millmont) located in Union County, and 17756 (Muncy) located partly in Northumberland County are the highest priority ZIP Codes for SNAP outreach in the region.

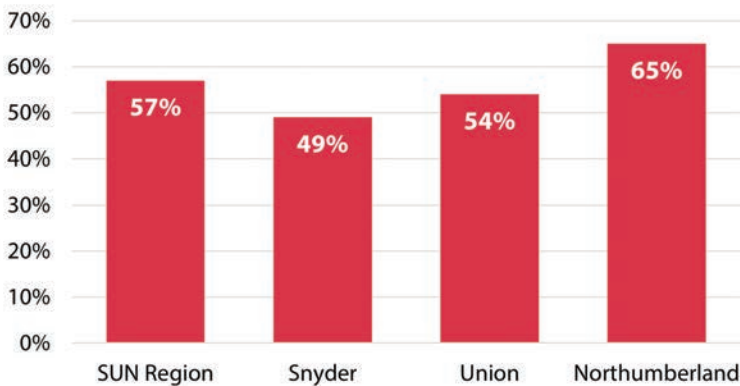
Each of these ZIP codes has an individual SNAP participation gap of more than 250 people, a family participation gap over 50 families, and SNAP utilization rates for both families and individuals below 50% of the likely-eligible population.

Additionally, ZIP Codes 17842 (Middleburg) in Snyder County, 17777 (Watsonstown) in Northumberland County, 17821 (Danville) partly in Northumberland County are Medium-Low Priority ZIP Codes. This means they have a family participation gap over 50, an individual participation gap over 250 and a utilization rate below 75%.

SNAP PARTICIPATION AT FOOD PANTRIES ACROSS THE SUN REGION

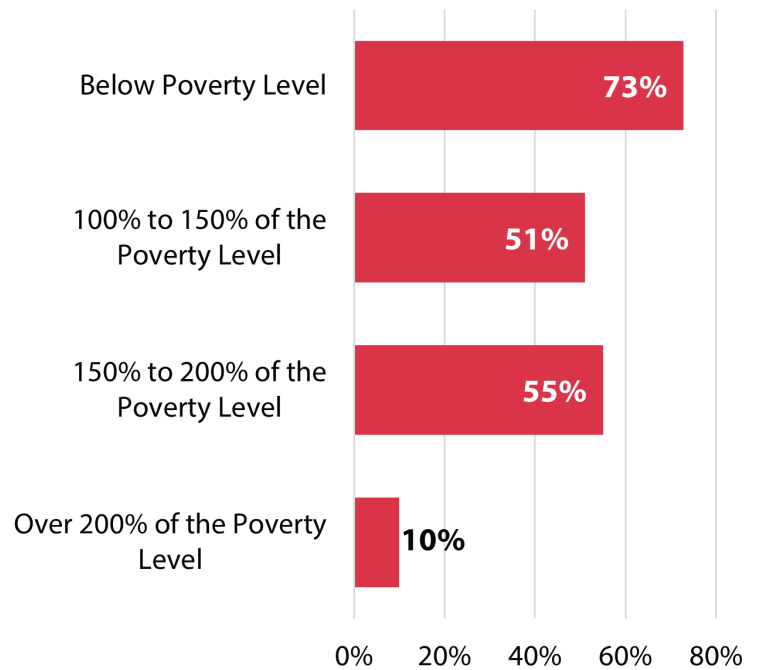
Surveys at pantries across the SUN counties show that most food pantry visitors reported participating in SNAP. Fully 57% of households surveyed are receiving SNAP benefits. While there is some variability by county, all counties have SNAP participation at or above 49% among survey respondents.

SNAP Participation Among Food Pantry Visitors in the SUN Region



SNAP participation data for pantries in the SUN region enrolled in Service Insights on MealConnect (an electronic neighbor intake tool abbreviated as SIMC), largely aligns with the relative participation rates by county, although reported SNAP participation rates are lower on SIMC, which could be in part due to the fact these questions are sometimes skipped by pantry intake staff or volunteers but were not skipped during surveys. Northumberland again has the highest rate at 54%, while Union is 47% and Snyder is 36%.

SNAP Participation Rates by Ratio of Income to Poverty Threshold



Results broken down by a household's ratio of income to poverty level, which is based on household size and reported income, show that SNAP participation is most likely among households with reported incomes below the federal poverty level. This is important because these households are the most likely to be eligible for SNAP, as well as the most likely to be eligible for a meaningful amount of SNAP benefits. This result holds for every county in the SUN region; all have SNAP participation rates above 70% for households with incomes below the federal poverty level.

Together with the secondary data from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and the American Community Survey, discussed in the previous section, these results demonstrate that SNAP participation is successful in the SUN region, especially in Northumberland County and among households in every county who are likely eligible for SNAP.

While pantries in all counties should continue to incorporate SNAP outreach activities into daily operations, those in Union and especially Snyder may have opportunities to increase SNAP participation among visitors. However, based on the results, pantry visitors who do not participate in SNAP are more likely to qualify for lower amounts of SNAP benefits because they have incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty line.



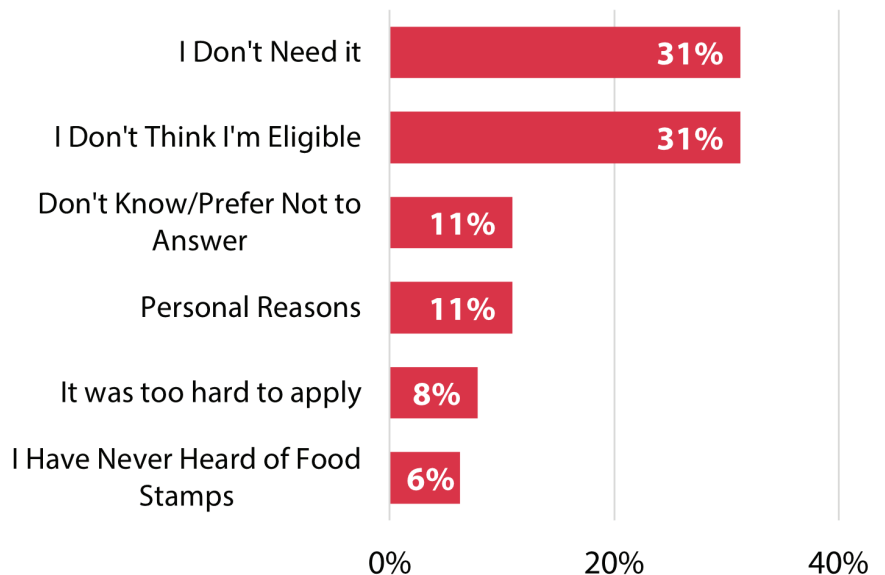
Senior food pantry visitor households are disproportionately likely to fall into the 100% to 200% federal poverty line threshold. They make up the majority (59%) of all households with incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty line, and 76% of households with incomes between 150% and 200% of the federal poverty line, despite representing just 46% of households overall.

Seniors have lower SNAP participation rates than other household types among pantry visitors in the SUN region. A total of 51% of seniors participate in SNAP, compared to 59% of households with children and 65% of households without children. Together, these data points mean that pantries in the SUN counties should prioritize SNAP outreach for seniors. Although seniors are less likely to be eligible for a sizable monthly SNAP benefit amount, they have a simplified two-page application for SNAP that only has to be recertified every two years. This simplified version can make the SNAP application process worth it, even for households who qualify only for the minimum benefit.

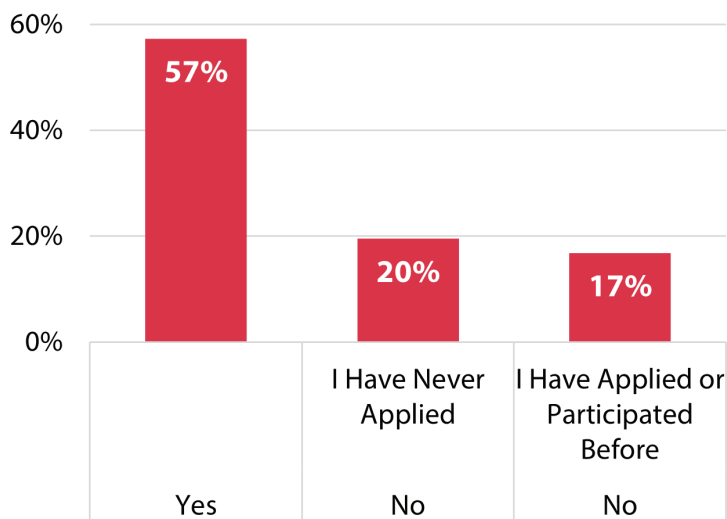
REASONS FOR NOT PARTICIPATING IN SNAP AND OUTREACH IMPLICATIONS

Nearly a third of food pantry visitors (30%) have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line and do not participate in SNAP. Because this analysis assumes that households' incomes lie at the top of range they selected (i.e. it assumes a household monthly income of \$2,000 for a household that selected they earn between \$1,000 and \$2,000), it is likely that many of these households are eligible for SNAP.

Reasons for Not Applying for SNAP among Non-Participant Households Under 200% FPL



SNAP Participation and Application History among Pantry Visitor Households



The most frequent responses for why households in this group did not participate in SNAP is that they do not believe they need it and that they do not think they are eligible. Nearly two thirds of households selected one of these two responses (31% each). Some respondents who are not enrolled in SNAP said that they do not need it because they have access to the pantry. Others who also stated that they do not need SNAP said that they thought other people could use it more. This offers an opportunity to increase awareness of program rules. Because SNAP is a mandatory entitlement program, everyone who qualifies can receive benefits without taking away from others.

In addition, 11% of households cited personal reasons for not applying for SNAP. These reasons include pride and being shamed to go to pantries, as well as religious reasons for not receiving benefits. Another household said they were afraid of jeopardizing their citizenship process by being considered a public charge. These reasons again offer an opportunity to increase understanding of program rules and to work to reduce stigma around the use of SNAP in the SUN region.

Overall, 20% of food pantry visitors have never applied for SNAP, while an additional 17% have applied before but are not currently participating. Furthermore, an estimated 89% of food pantry visitors are likely eligible for SNAP based on reported monthly income. Together, these results show there are major opportunities to increase SNAP participation among the pantry visitor household population.

However, as the discussion above indicates, the SUN region households who are the most likely to receive meaningful amounts of SNAP benefits are already participating. This means that opportunities are more limited than in other counties,^{24,25} and that it may pay the highest dividends to focus on the simplified two-page application for elderly or disabled households.



WIC Participation

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 (\$55,500 for a family of four in 2023) 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 5. Applicants already receiving SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are automatically considered income eligible, but the full application for and utilization of WIC benefits is more complex than that of SNAP.

The WIC program provides participants with access to specific nutritious foods considered to be lacking in their diets. The average value of a monthly WIC food package is \$65 for adults, \$105 for infants, and \$50 for children;²⁶ participants can only purchase food with their WIC benefits from stores that accept WIC Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Cards. WIC participants in Pennsylvania must bring their EBT cards to their local WIC office every few months to have their benefits reloaded, as Pennsylvania is one of only nine states with an offline EBT system.²⁷ These frequent county office visits may cause disruptions in participants' lives that can deter them from continuing to participate in the program.²⁸

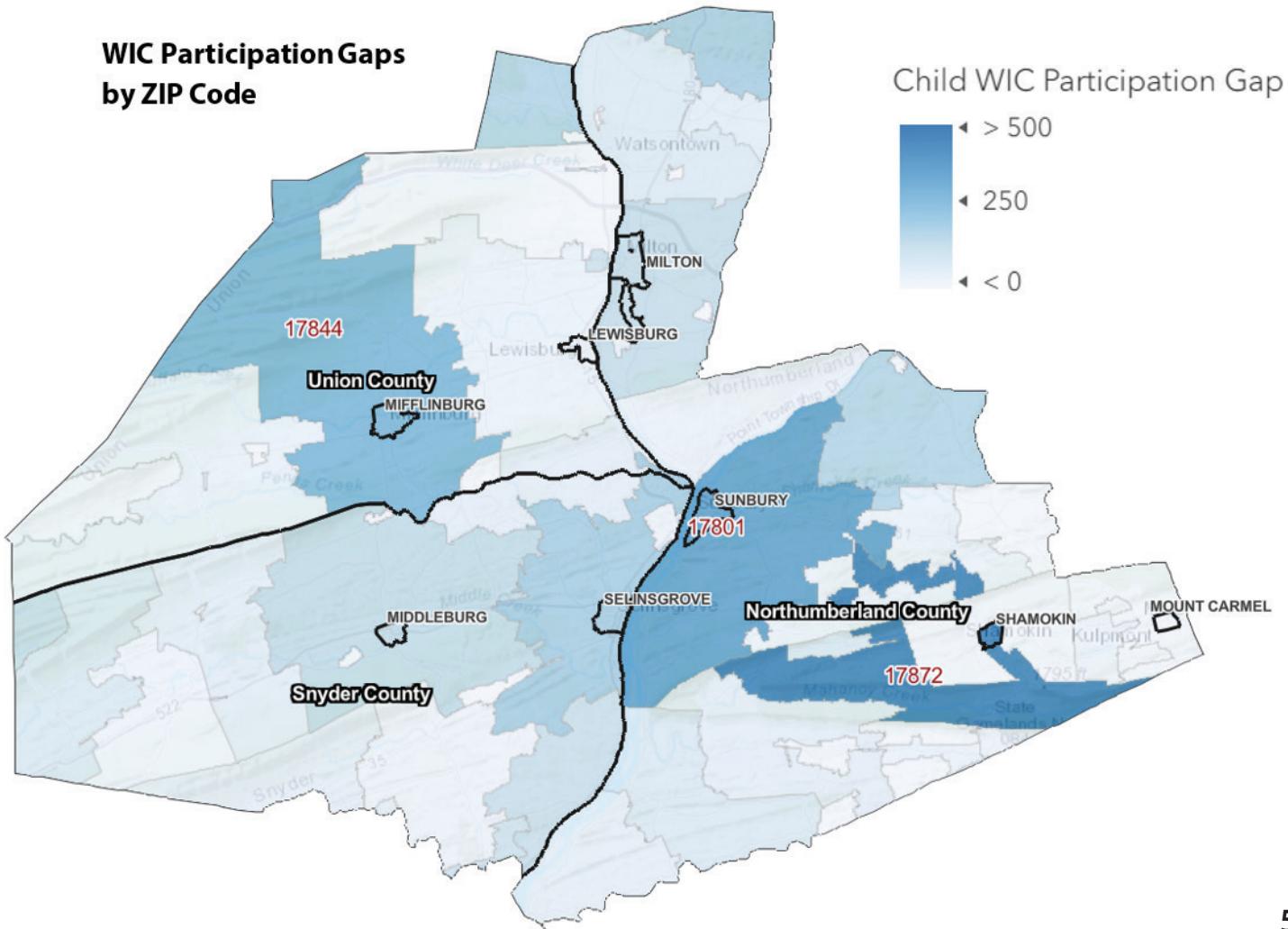
March 2024 WIC Participation by County

County	Total WIC Participants	Percent Change in WIC Participation since Dec. 2020	Number of WIC Participants Under 6	Participation Rate for Children under 6
Northumberland	1,828	24%	1,422	72%
Snyder	476	11%	374	52%
Union	329	-3%	264	56%
SUN Region	2,633	17%	2,060	65%

State WIC participation was 5% higher in March 2024 compared to December 2020, the earliest date data was available from the Pennsylvania Dept. of Health. In the SUN counties, WIC participation is up 17%, driven by a 24% increase in WIC participation in Northumberland County and an 11% increase in Snyder County. WIC participation in Union County is down slightly at a 3% dip.

Participation rates for WIC for children under 6 in families with incomes below 185% FPL show Northumberland is ranked 19th in the state in WIC participation with a participation rate of 72%, while Union and Snyder are ranked 52nd and 56th in the state, respectively with participation rates of 56% and 52%.

At a ZIP Code level, three ZIP Codes stand out for large WIC participation gaps, including two in Northumberland County and one in Union County. ZIP code 17872 in Shamokin has the largest SNAP participation gap at 420 children under age 6 who are likely eligible for WIC but are not participating. Over 80% of all children under 6 in 17872 live in households with incomes under 185% of the federal poverty line. ZIP Code 17801 in Sunbury also has a major WIC participation gap of 325 children who are likely eligible but not participating. Of note, ZIP Code 17844 in Mifflinburg has a child WIC participation gap of 253, although this gap is potentially elevated by Amish or Old Order Mennonite households in this area. Overall, fewer than half of children who are eligible for WIC are participating in WIC in these three highest-priority ZIP Codes.



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. 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 some disabled adults in day care programs. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) allow community organizations and school food authorities to provide meals to children in the summer when schools are closed. This analysis focuses on the programs for which school food authorities are intended to be the primary sponsor, which are NSLP, SBP, and SFSP/SSO.

COUNTY AND DISTRICT-LEVEL SCHOOL BREAKFAST AND LUNCH PARTICIPATION

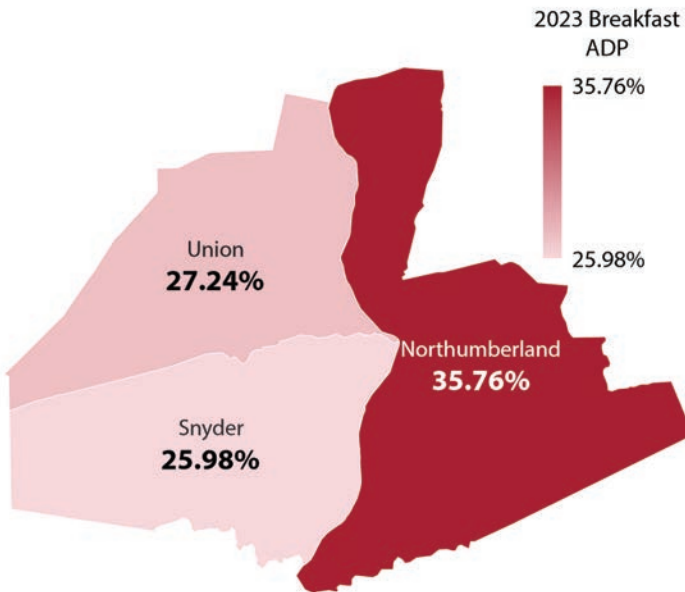
As of October 2023, average breakfast and lunch participation rates varied by county and by school district within the SUN region. As shown in the maps below, Northumberland County (including Danville Area and Southern Columbia School Districts, which serve some Northumberland County children despite being based in other counties) has the highest breakfast participation rate while Snyder County has the highest lunch participation rate. All three counties have breakfast participation rates below the statewide average of 35.9%, while Northumberland and Snyder are above the state average of 58.8% for lunch at 64.4% and 66.5% respectively. Union County is below the statewide average for both breakfast and lunch.

County	School District	2023 Breakfast ADP	2023 Lunch ADP
Northumberland	Danville Area	24.8%	49.2%
	Line Mountain	37.1%	62.2%
	Milton Area	57.7%	80.0%
	Mount Carmel Area	51.3%	79.6%
	Shamokin Area	34.5%	72.5%
	Shikellamy	31.1%	63.0%
	Warrior Run	22.5%	59.9%
	Southern Columbia	23.9%	43.5%
Snyder	Midd-West	31.6%	72.9%
	Selinsgrove Area	20.3%	60.1%
Union	Lewisburg Area	27.2%	49.5%
	Mifflinburg Area	27.3%	64.1%

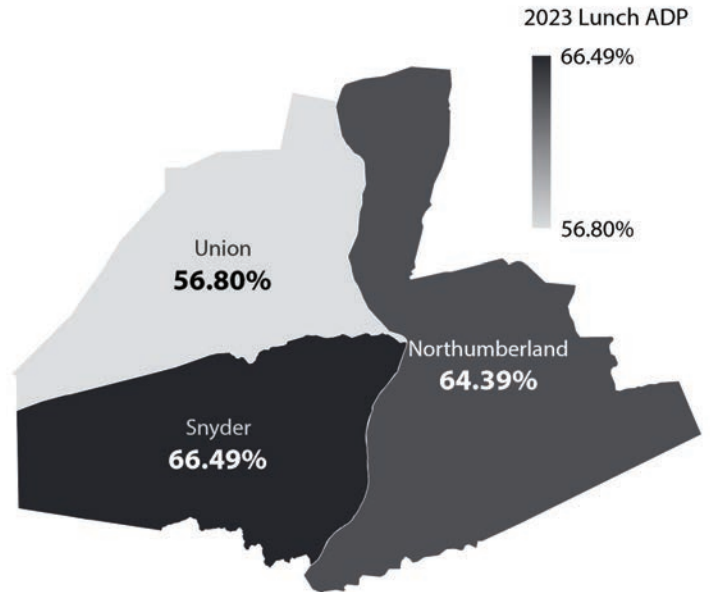
A tighter focus on individual school districts reveals that the county-level disparities are driven by differences in participation by school district. The chart above shows these differences by highlighting districts with higher participation rates for a particular meal service in green and school districts with lower participation rates in red.

Milton and Mount Carmel Area School Districts in Northumberland County have high participation rates for both breakfast and lunch; Shamokin Area has a high lunch participation rate but a low breakfast participation rate. Conversely, there are no districts in Union or Snyder County with high participation rates for both meals, and just one, Midd-West, with a high participation rate for lunch.

2023 Average Daily Breakfast Participation by County



2023 Average Daily Lunch Participation by County



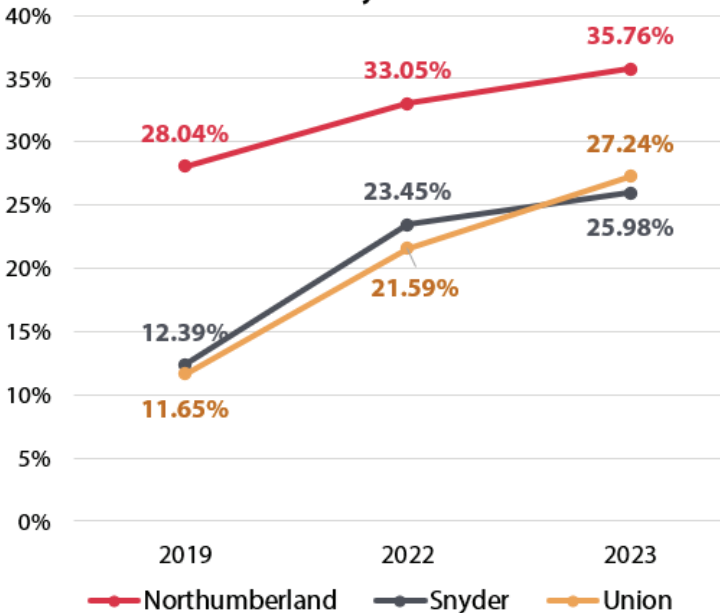
THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSAL SCHOOL BREAKFAST IN THE SUN REGION

In fall 2022, Governor Wolf announced an initiative to provide breakfast at no cost, with no application requirement, to every public-school student in the Commonwealth. After two years of the program, it has become clear that universal school meal eligibility has a major impact on meal participation.

In the SUN region, school breakfast participation increased 28.6% between 2019, the last year for which there is reliable meal service data unaffected by pandemic response, and 2022. Since 2022, breakfast participation has continued to climb, though at a slower pace, with 2023 seeing another 10.6% increase over the prior year.

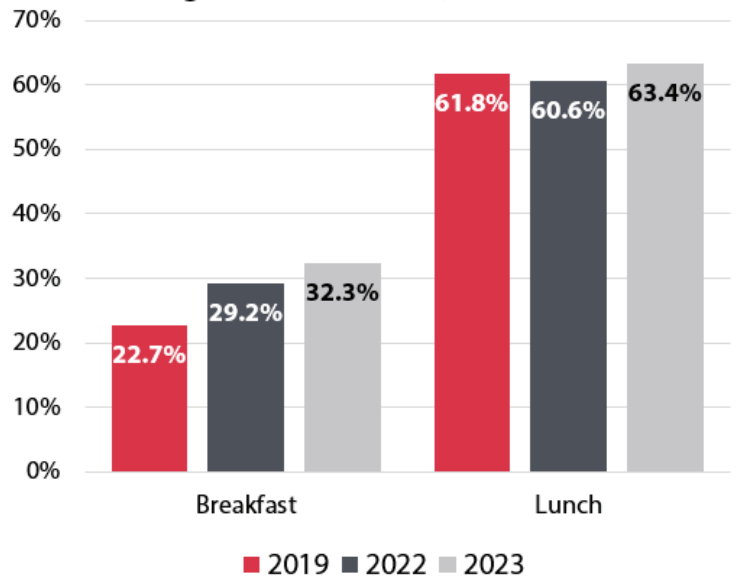
Overall, breakfast participation in the SUN counties has increased 9.6 percentage points, or 42.2%, over 2019. Meanwhile, lunch participation has remained nearly flat, with just a 2.5% growth over 2019. The fact that breakfast participation has jumped so dramatically while lunch has remained stable is compelling evidence of the effectiveness of universality to increase meal participation.

Average Daily School Breakfast Participation by County 2019-2023



A closer look at the data reveals that the regional increase was driven primarily by substantial growth in Union and Snyder – in public schools in these counties, breakfast participation more than doubled from about 12% to more than 25%. In Northumberland County, participation grew only about 32%, but it started from a much higher baseline, as it rose from 28% to nearly 36%.

Average Daily Participation Rate in SUN Region Public Schools, 2019-2023



Northumberland's head start and slower growth in breakfast is likely due to the fact that many of the county's schools participated in the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which allowed high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students prior to the Commonwealth's breakfast initiative. In 2019, Mount Carmel Area, Shamokin Area, and Shikellamy Area School Districts all participated in CEP in all district schools, while there were no districts or individual buildings in Union or Snyder participating in CEP at that time.

As of 2023, however, several more schools and districts had opted in, including Warrior Run Elementary and all Milton Area SD schools in Northumberland County as well as all of Mid-West School District in Snyder and Mifflinburg Area School District in Union.

With that said, and as discussed elsewhere in this section, breakfast participation continues to lag lunch participation across the region, even in CEP schools. While universal eligibility is a powerful tool to help increase school meal consumption, there is still work to be done to ensure all students receive all of the school meals for which they are eligible. Of the 42 public schools serving children in the SUN counties, less than half (19, or 45%) offered alternative breakfast models that have been proven by research to increase breakfast participation, such as breakfast in the classroom or grab-and-go breakfast,²⁹ as of December 2023.



SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM (SFSP) LOCATION ANALYSIS

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally funded child congregate meal program intended to alleviate child food insecurity in the summer, when schools are not open and school breakfasts and lunches are not available. This is a crucial program at a time when children, who already face the highest food insecurity rates among all age groups, are at most risk of going hungry.

Both school districts and community organizations may sponsor SFSP sites. School food authorities can take advantage of the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) of the National School Lunch Program to provide year-round meal service with a minimum of administrative barriers. The experience for children receiving meals at SFSP or SSO sites is very similar, so in the below analysis, SFSP or “summer meals” will be used as an umbrella term to refer to both programs, except where the distinction is relevant. The potential eligibility and 2023 SFSP Site Locations Analysis uses SFSP site data from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which oversees SFSP at the federal level. At the state level, SFSP is administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE.)

In general, SFSP sites are located within census tracts in which at least 50% of resident children are at or below 185% of the federal poverty level and would therefore be eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches. Census tracts that qualify in 2024 are shown in blue in the map below. Sites can become individually eligible if they are close enough to an individual school that qualifies for the program or if a sponsor can prove that 50% or more of participating children who attend a site meet the income thresholds. For more information about SFSP site eligibility, please see the Pennsylvania Department of Education.³⁰

In 2023, the SUN counties had 34 SFSP sites. Northumberland had the vast majority with 30, while Snyder had three and Union one. A total of 23 SFSP sites were sponsored by the Greater Susquehanna Valley YMCA, by far the largest sponsor. All but one of these sites were in Northumberland; the other site was in Union. The next largest sponsor, with seven sites, was the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, which operated seven sites. Five of these were in Northumberland and two were in Snyder. Warrior Run School District operated two sites, while Mount Carmel Area School District and Selinsgrove Area School District each sponsored one site. All sites across the SUN region operated under SFSP rather than SSO, and all were “open sites,” meaning that any child was eligible to receive a meal without needing to pre-register or be part of a specific program.



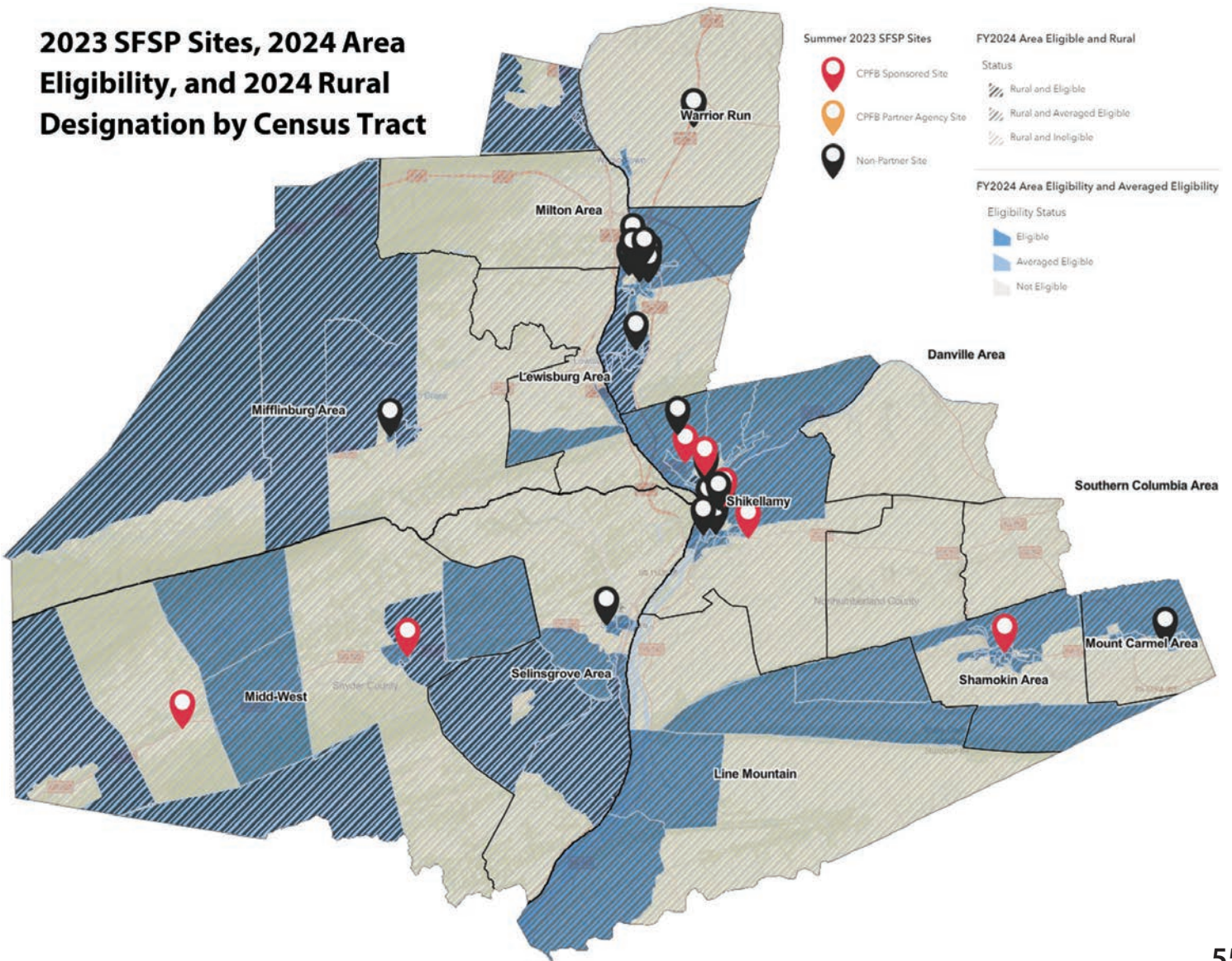
There are 34 total SFSP sites in the SUN counties.

SFSP sites were not evenly distributed across the SUN region. The vast majority of SFSP sites were located on the east side of the Susquehanna in Shikellamy School District and the Northumberland County portion of Milton Area School District. Specifically, sites were concentrated in and around Sunbury and Milton boroughs respectively. Outside of these areas, there were sites in Turbotville, Shamokin, and Mount Carmel in Northumberland County, Selingsgrove, Middleburg, and Beaver Springs in Snyder County, and Mifflinburg in Union County. On average, SFSP sites in the region were open for an average of about eight weeks. The longest operating sites ran for fourteen weeks, and the shortest ran for only five days in June.

Waivers implemented in all child nutrition programs during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that non-congregate feeding, where meals can be picked up for offsite consumption, could be an effective way of overcoming this issue. As of 2023, there is a new USDA rule in place allowing for non-congregate SFSP sites in rural areas.³¹ According to USDA FNS’s rural eligibility designations released in early 2024 in the map below, the entirety of the SUN region qualifies as rural as shown by the diagonal shading;³² this means that take-away SFSP meals are potentially an option in any area eligible census tract in the three-county area, including those covering denser areas like Sunbury, Shamokin, or Mount Carmel.

It is important to note that several high-population areas of the region, especially the Lewisburg and Selingsgrove areas, largely lack area eligibility for SFSP. It is therefore not possible to place open SFSP sites in these areas, and operating closed enrolled sites may be an administrative barrier too high for some sponsors to overcome. In places ineligible or unsuitable for SFSP, the charitable food network should invest in privately funded summer food programs for children.

2023 SFSP Sites, 2024 Area Eligibility, and 2024 Rural Designation by Census Tract





Recommendations on the Utilization of Government Programs

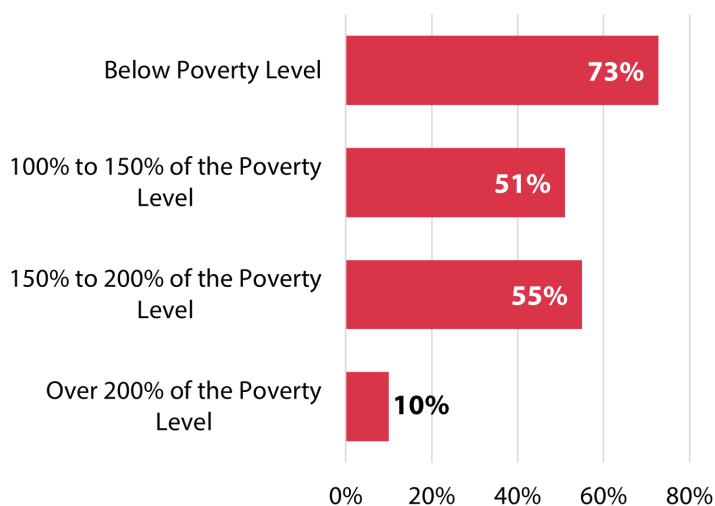
Section 3 Finding 1: SNAP participation rates among pantry visitors in the SUN region are relatively robust. A total of 57% of pantry visitors reported participating in SNAP, including 73% of food pantry visitors who have incomes below the federal poverty line.

Households with incomes below the federal poverty line are the most likely to qualify for a significant amount of SNAP benefits, so most pantry visitors with incomes at that level are participating in SNAP. This means that the food pantry visitor households who are not participating in SNAP and who have incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty line are likely to be eligible for less generous amounts of SNAP benefits.

Recommendation: While it continues to be important to prioritize SNAP outreach for all households in the SUN region, food pantries in Union and Snyder counties should put a special emphasis on SNAP outreach to senior households. These households are the most likely to be eligible and not participating. Senior households and people with disabilities and fixed incomes are eligible for a simplified two-page application that only has to be recertified every two years. This simplified application can make the SNAP application process worth it, as one application can provide \$550 in benefits to afford food over two years, even for households eligible only for the minimum SNAP benefit of \$23 a month.



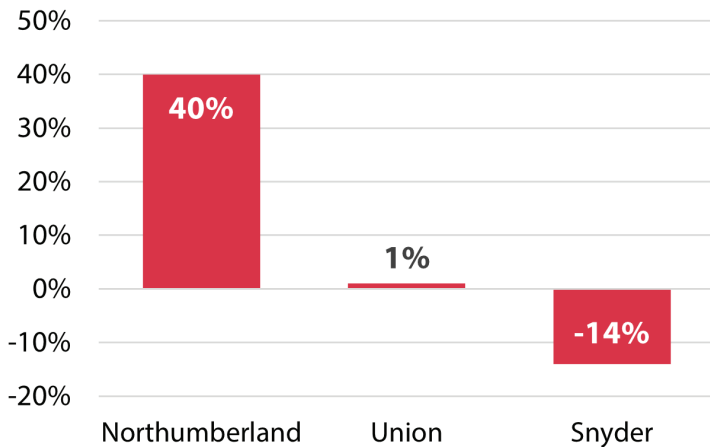
SNAP Participation Rates by Ratio of Income to Poverty Threshold



Section 3 Finding 2: SNAP participation at the county level in the SUN region has diverged since the Great Recession. SNAP participation dropped 14% in Snyder County and 1% in Union County between 2013 and 2023, while it grew 40% in Northumberland County. As a result, SNAP participation rates are much higher in Northumberland County than in Union and Snyder counties.

At the ZIP Code level, there are considerable opportunities to increase SNAP participation in all three counties, with 17845 in Millmont, 17841 in McClure, and 17756 in Muncy as the highest priority ZIP Codes for SNAP outreach. ZIP Codes 17842 in Middleburg, Snyder County, 17777 in Watsontown, Northumberland County, and 17821 in Danville are ZIP Codes with large SNAP participation gaps and low participation rates.

Percent Change in SNAP Participation in Last 10 Years



Recommendation: There is room to increase SNAP participation in certain areas of the SUN region, particularly Snyder County, which has experienced a participation drop of 14% in the last 10 years compared to a 12% increase in the state overall.

Geographic outreach tools and advertising could be particularly effective in high-priority ZIP Codes, as well as working with pantries in these areas to spread awareness and assistance for SNAP applications for eligible households. Outreach materials targeted towards senior and disabled households could be very effective in the SUN counties.



Section 3 Finding 3: WIC participation varies by county, with Northumberland having among the highest WIC participation rates in the state, and Union and Snyder having among the lowest. There remains room for improvement in WIC participation in certain areas of Northumberland County, however. ZIP Code-level data shows that 17801 in Sunbury and 17872 in Shamokin have the largest WIC participation gaps in the region.

In addition to Sunbury and Shamokin area, ZIP Code 17844 in Mifflinburg in Union County stands out as a ZIP code with a child WIC participation gap of more than 250 individuals.

Recommendation: County and ZIP Code level findings strongly point to the need for increased WIC outreach in all counties in the SUN region as well as in specific high-eligibility ZCTAs. Survey results indicate that food pantries would be valuable places to do outreach, as fewer than half of likely-eligible families with children under age 6 participate in WIC.

Administrative burdens imposed at the state level, such as recharging benefits in person every three months, makes WIC a more difficult program to use. Program administrators and stakeholders who conduct WIC outreach should acknowledge these difficulties upfront in the outreach process, while also providing information about the benefits of the program for young children. Additionally, advocates should talk to legislators about the importance of making WIC more accessible.



Section 3 Finding 4: School breakfast participation in each county in the SUN region runs behind the statewide average of 35.9%, with room for growth in Union and Snyder counties and in school districts like Warrior Run and Southern Columbia in Northumberland County.

Breakfast participation in the SUN counties has increased 42% since 2019 thanks to the 2022 universal school breakfast initiative, but it still lags lunch participation by a wide margin. Breakfast participation growth has increased in Union and Snyder since 2019, as these counties had no schools that offered universal school meals prior to the expansion, while Northumberland had several participating in the Community Eligibility Provision. Union and Snyder both started with participation rates around 12% in 2019 that have since more than doubled to more than 25% in each county.

Recommendation: SUN region schools should work to implement strategies proven to increase participation in school meals, with a specific focus on breakfast given the program’s universality. Universality both benefits students, who can access meals without paperwork requirements, and schools, which may receive increased reimbursements thanks to higher participation.³³

Of the 42 public schools in the SUN region, less than half (45%) reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education that they offered alternative breakfast models. Alternative service models that have been shown to increase participation include breakfast in the classroom and breakfast after the bell, which make breakfast an official part of the school day, and grab-and-go or second-chance breakfast, which allow students to receive breakfast in a more flexible manner than do traditional service methods.³⁴



Section 3 Finding 5: Federally funded summer meal sites for children mostly lie in the more densely populated areas of the SUN region, with the most in Milton and Sunbury. However, there are several eligible areas of the region that lacked an SFSP site as of summer 2023, including Port Trevorton, much of Line Mountain School District, and most of western Union and Snyder counties.

Every area-eligible census tract in the region is potentially eligible to host non-congregate SFSP sites that allows for children and their families to pick up bulk packages of summer meals for offsite consumption thanks to a new USDA rule. However, there are many children across the region who do not live in an eligible area or in a community in which SFSP in either its congregate or non-congregate form would be an appropriate service model.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should seek to ensure that children and their families have meaningful access to the same type and amount of food supports during the summer as during the school year by seeking out potential SFSP sites or sponsors in eligible areas that lack a site. Meanwhile, stakeholders should continue to invest in privately funded summer food programming for children in areas that are ineligible or not a good fit for SFSP.



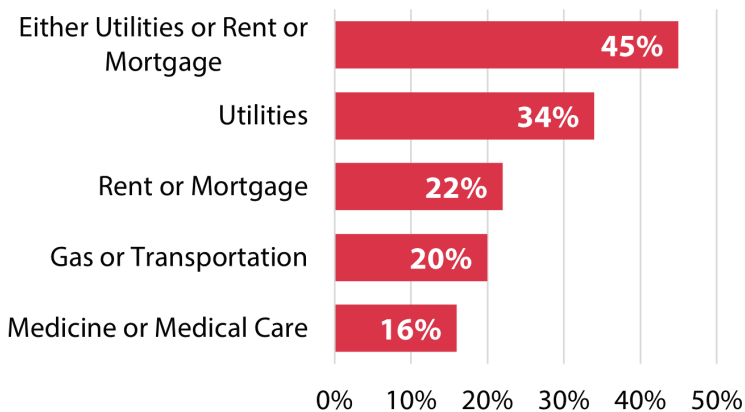


SECTION 4: INTERSECTING AND UPSTREAM ISSUES

Drivers of Food Insecurity

To better understand the root causes of food insecurity in Snyder, Union, and Northumberland Counties, this section combines extensive secondary data analysis with primary food pantry visitor survey data collected at pantries throughout the region.

Economic Tradeoffs with Food among Pantry Visitors in the SUN Region



Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition largely resulting from economic insecurity and the related factors of household income, employment status, disability status, and race or ethnicity.^{35,36} The prevalence of 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.³⁷ Homeownership and housing insecurity are strong predictors of household food insecurity,³⁸ and several of these underlying factors vary dramatically by race and ethnicity in the SUN region, making them key contributors to the disparate food insecurity rates seen among different racial and ethnic groups.

Overall, this analysis finds that there are several key upstream and intersecting factors contributing to food insecurity in the SUN counties, including income and low wages, disability status, housing insecurity, health conditions, and transportation. The strain of low incomes and intersecting issues is reflected in the graph to the left that shows the five major reported economic tradeoffs with food among pantry visitors. For each of these items, the chart represents the percentage of pantry visitors who noted having to choose between food and the other necessary expenses.

In the SUN region, limited fixed incomes and low wages are the primary economic concern, while disability status, housing affordability, utility costs, transportation, and medicine or medical care are intersecting issues. Financial access among pantry visitors is limited but relatively strong compared to other counties in central Pennsylvania.^{39,40} This section will explore each of these intersecting and upstream issues in turn to better inform stakeholders interested in working towards ending hunger.

INCOME SOURCES

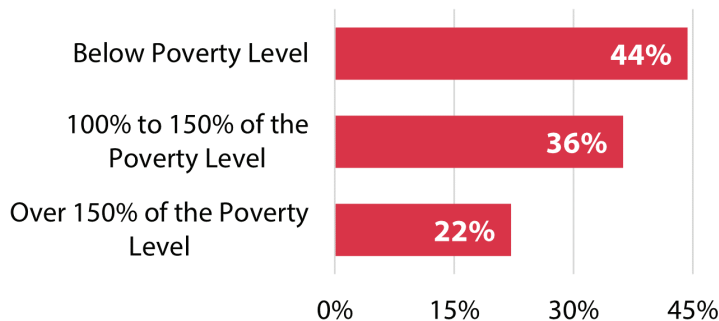
Household income is the most important contributing factor to a household's food insecurity status and is strongly correlated with the incidence of very low food security. Households who earn less than the federal poverty line have very low food security rates of 44%, compared to 36% for households with incomes of 100% to 150% of the poverty level.

When it comes to main income source, pantry surveys show that total of 87% of food pantry visitors in the SUN region either work full-time, receive Social Security or a pension or Disability or SSI. An additional 5% stated they were working at least part-time. This distribution of income sources makes it clear that employment status and unemployment contribute very little to overall demand for charitable food services in the SUN counties.

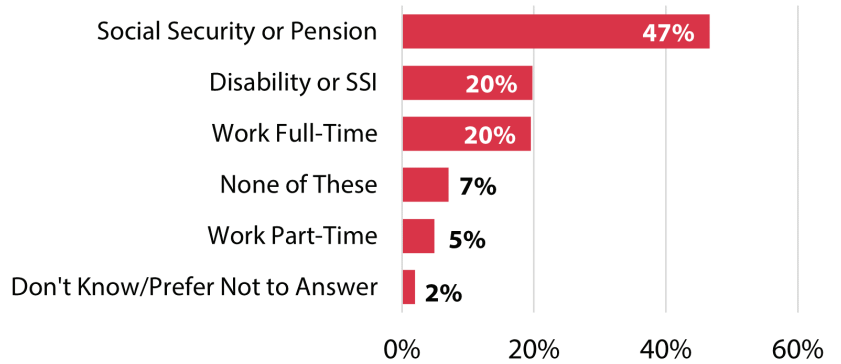
There are of course significant differentials in the main source of income by household type. Senior households are the most likely to claim they receive Social Security or a pension (82% of all senior households); 12% receive Disability or SSI.

Households with children are the most likely to have reported working full-time, with nearly half of all households with children reporting working full-time. Working-age households without children who visit the charitable food system are the most likely to receive Disability or SSI, at 37% of households without children.

Very Low Food Security Status by Ratio of Income to Poverty



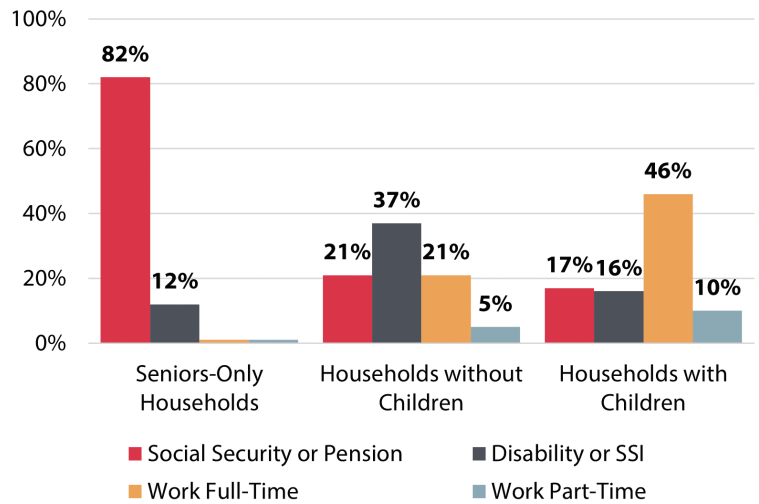
Main Source of Household Income among Pantry Visitors in the SUN Region



An additional 21% of households without children work full-time or receive Social Security or a pension. In sum, these results again point to the fact that unemployment is a relatively low driver of visits to the charitable food system in the SUN region, as the vast majority of households either work full-time, receive Social Security or pension benefits, or receive Disability or SSI.

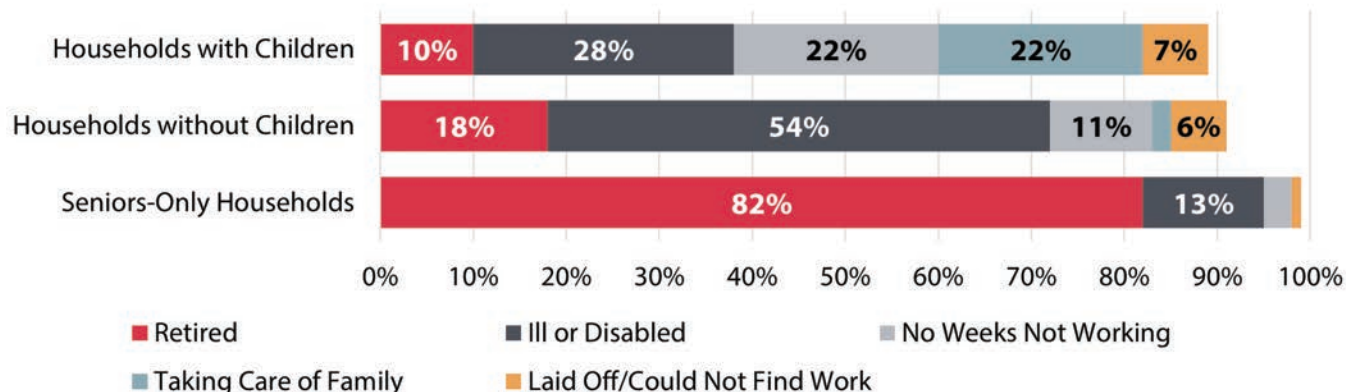
The main reasons people gave for as to why they were not working at some point in the last year were either being retired (44%) or ill or disabled (29%). 11% of pantry visitors said there were no weeks in the last year in which they were not working, while taking care of family came in at 7%.

Main Source of Income by Household Type



Again, there are significant differences by household type. These differences demonstrate that people who cited disability as a main reason for not working at some point in the last twelve months are not necessarily receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI or Disability) as income. Over half (54%) of households without children indicated disability as a barrier for working, but just 37% said they receive Disability or SSI. A total of 28% of households with children cited disability but just 16% received SSDI or SSI. The necessity of taking care of family is a major barrier to work among households with children.

Main Reasons for Not Working at Some Point in the Last 12 Months



Even among households who work full time, low wages and irregular hours have a major impact on earning potential. Nearly half of households who reported working full time earn less than \$2,000 a month, which equates to \$24,000 a year. Among the households who work full-time and reported no weeks not working in the last year, 68% earn less than \$24,000 a year. This is the equivalent of \$11.50 an hour and is less than the poverty level for a household of three. In fact, 38% of households who reported working full time earn less than the federal poverty level, and 74% earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line. Taken together, this data strongly indicates that low wages and irregular hours, rather than unemployment, are the main barriers to food security among food pantry visitors.

DISABILITY

Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are federal programs providing income support to disabled and, in some cases, elderly or otherwise qualifying individuals. Though the specifics of the two programs and their eligibility standards differ –SSDI has a work history requirement that SSI lacks, and often has higher benefit amounts, while disabled children can also be eligible for SSI – both provide monthly cash benefits to individuals who are unable to work.

Across the SUN region, nearly 20% of surveyed neighbors replied that they rely primarily upon either SSDI or SSI for income, with Northumberland County having the highest proportion of SSI or SSDI recipients at 28% of respondent households. Northumberland County had a much smaller proportion of households relying upon traditional Social Security, which is a retirement benefit, than did the others – in Union and Snyder, more than half of survey respondents were retired and receiving Social Security, but just a third in Northumberland were.

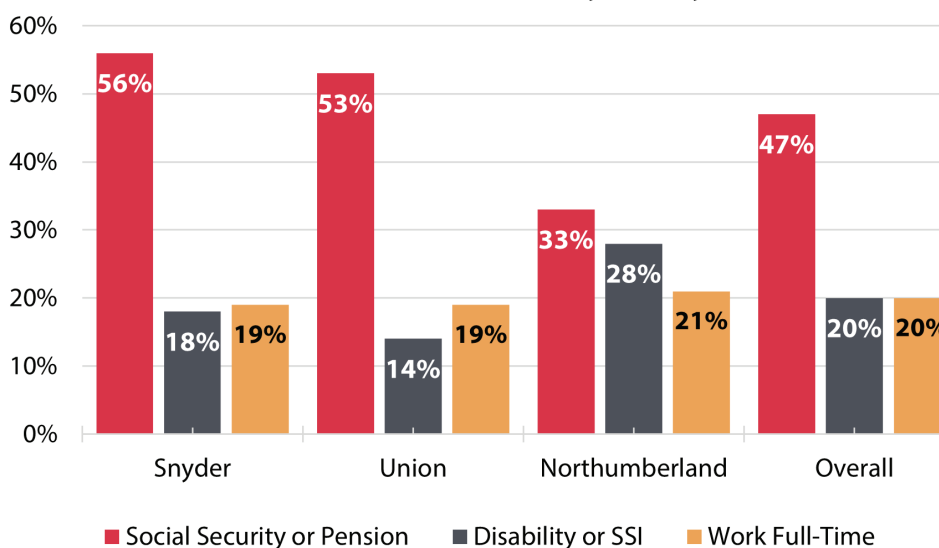
Regardless of county, however, SSI and/or SSDI recipients are overrepresented among pantry visitors – as of 2022, just 5.8% of Pennsylvanians participated in either program.^{41,42} This over-representation indicates that the benefit amount participants receive is not enough to meet their basic needs.

Indeed, the average monthly benefit for Pennsylvania’s SSDI recipients in 2022 was \$1,491,⁴³ and average benefits for SSI recipients were even lower at just \$657.⁴⁴ Both amounts are well below the TEFAP income eligibility threshold of 185% of the federal poverty line, even for a household of one. Among survey participants, 85% of people who received disability had a monthly household income less than \$2,000, and 32% had a monthly household income below \$1,000.

“The price of groceries is ridiculous, and he’s retired and I’m on disability so we’re living, you know... the paycheck doesn’t last the whole month.”

–Interview Participant

Main Source of Income by County

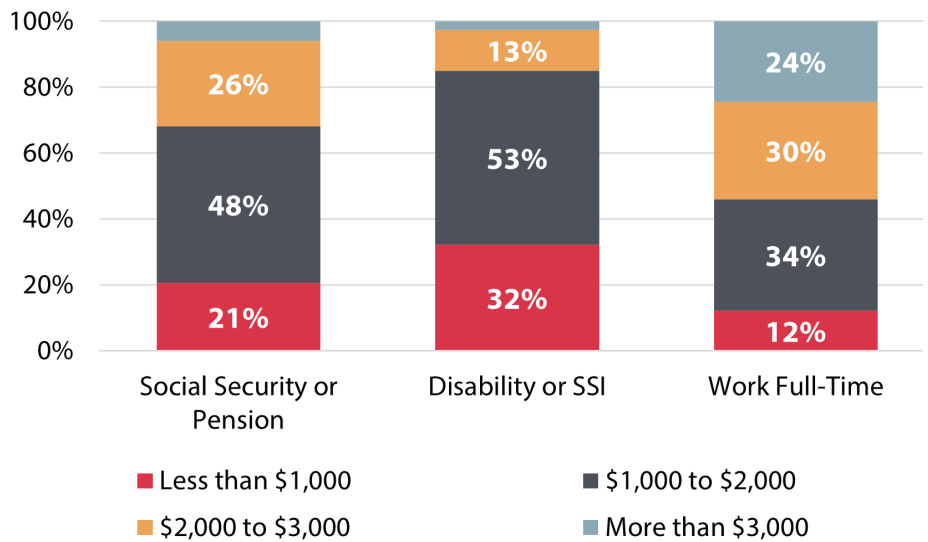


Furthermore, a 2020 USDA analysis found that, as of 2018, 33.0% of households with a working-age member who was not in the labor force due to disability (regardless of their source of income) faced food insecurity, and households with a working-age member whose disability did not prevent them from working still had food insecurity rates of 24.8%; by comparison, the food insecurity rate in households with no working-age adults with disabilities was only 12.0%. This analysis notes that these disproportionate food insecurity rates exist even though SSDI and SSI are specifically intended to help individuals with disabilities meet their basic needs.⁴⁵ Potential reasons for this disparity may include, but are not limited to: the difficulty of applying for and being approved to receive disability benefits, asset limits for SSI recipients preventing them from building a financial cushion in case of emergency, and the increased costs many disabled individuals face due to their medical needs.

HOUSING AND EVICTIONS

In the surveys conducted by CPFBR researchers, pantry visitors indicated that utilities and rent or mortgages were the top economic tradeoffs they face with food. Specifically, the questions asked whether a household had to choose between food and utilities or between food and their rent or mortgage. More than a third of households reported having to choose between food and utilities while just over a fifth reported choosing between food and their rent and mortgage.

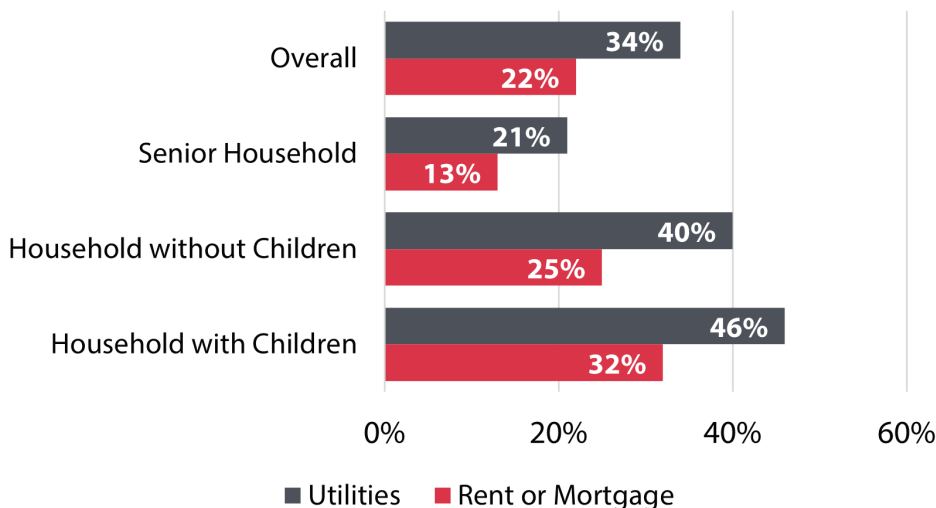
Monthly Income by Main Household Income Source



These tradeoffs varied greatly by household type. Households with children were by far the most likely to experience economic tradeoffs with housing expenses. Households with children have especially severe tradeoffs, as nearly half (46%) said they had been forced to choose between food and utilities and a third (32%) had to choose between food and rent or mortgage. A quarter of households without children described choosing between food and rent or mortgage while 40% described choosing between food and utilities.

Like other experiences of material hardship, such as very low food security, seniors were the least likely to have to make tradeoffs between food and utilities or rent/mortgage. Just 21% reported tradeoffs with utilities and 13% noted tradeoffs with rent or mortgage. This may be in part because senior households were most likely to own their own homes, at 46% of senior households compared to 33% and 31% of households with children and working-age households without children, respectively.

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



“... Sometimes my food really didn’t last and I had to endure my hunger because I can’t go without paying my rent, because otherwise I would be left without a roof.”
–Interview Participant



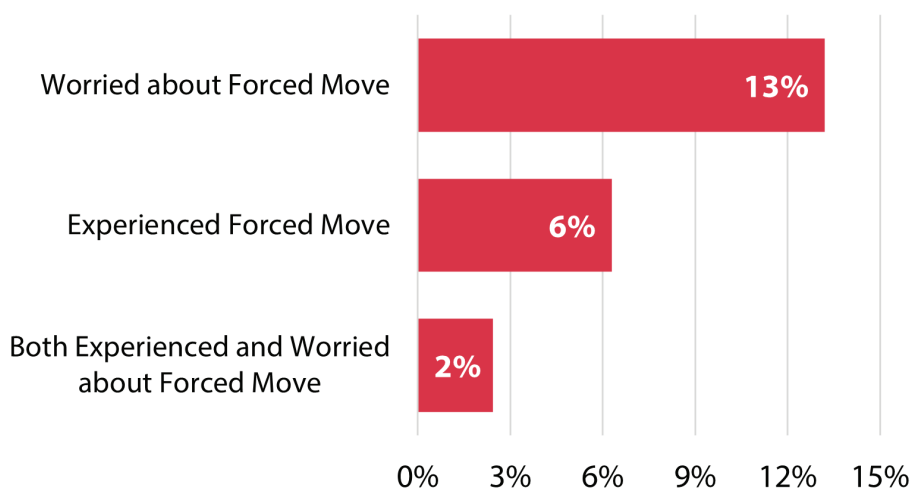
Pantry visitors were asked about their experiences with evictions and forced moves or their worries about evictions and forced moves. A total of 13% of pantry visitors said that they were worried about a forced move in the next year while 6% of pantry visitors indicated experiencing a forced move in the last year. These are high reported rates of evictions relative to the general population— pantry visitors are much more likely to experience eviction than the general population.⁴⁶

However, the SUN region’s eviction rates are much lower relative to pantry visitors in other counties.^{47,48} This aligns with statewide eviction data which shows that Union and Snyder have some of the lowest rates of eviction filings in the state, while Northumberland has relatively low rates of eviction filings.⁴⁹ Again, the pantry survey data aligns with statewide eviction filing data, as the reported rate of forced moves among pantry visitors in Northumberland is 9% compared to 5% in Union and Snyder.

Differences by household type also persist, as 11% of households with children reported experiencing a forced move in the last year, while just 3% and 4% of senior households and households without children reported experiencing an eviction respectively.

Despite relatively low eviction rates and economic tradeoffs around shelter, housing remains the number one community issue among pantry visitors in the SUN counties. Pantry visitors in Union County were asked to rank the biggest community issues from an expansive list of issues, and housing affordability came up as the number one reported concern. This indicates that stakeholders should continue to support and explore opportunities to expand housing opportunities and reduce housing insecurity.

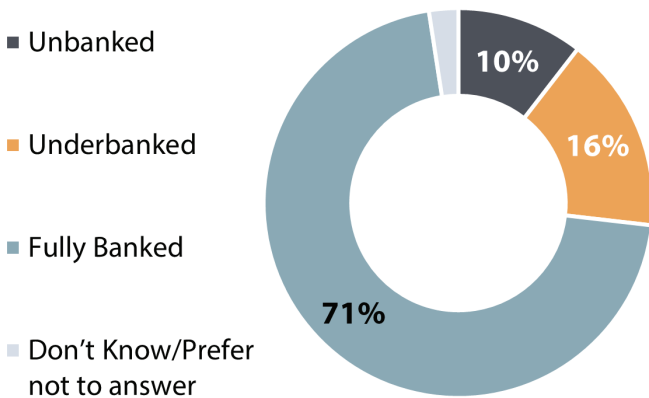
Forced Moves Among Pantry Visitors



FINANCIAL SYSTEM ACCESS

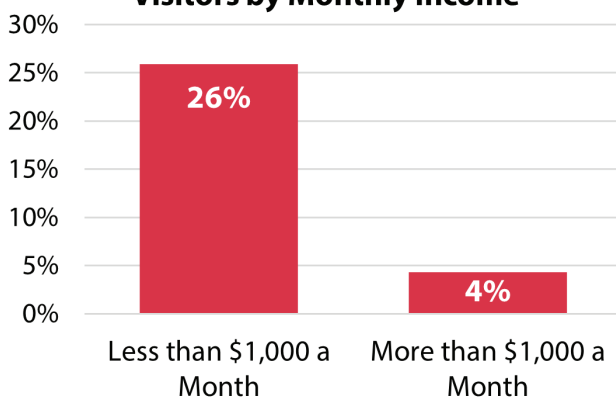
Access to mainstream financial services is relatively limited among food pantry visitors in the SUN counties. In the SUN region, 10% of pantry visitors are being unbanked, compared to the statewide average of 2.6% of Pennsylvanians and the national average of 4.5%. The underbanked rate of 16% of food pantry visitors matches the national average, making the main differentiator in financial access among food pantry visitors the rate of unbanked individuals. In relation to other counties in Central Pennsylvania, however, financial system access is relatively robust in the SUN region. For instance, 27% of pantry visitors in Lebanon County and 19% of pantry visitors in Lancaster County reported unbanked.^{50,51}

Banking Access Among Pantry Visitor Households



Elevated rates of limited or no financial access in pantry visitors are a concern for the charitable food network because mainstream financial system access helps connect people to economic mobility opportunities and is linked with greater financial well-being at both the individual and community level.⁵² Without access to traditional banking, households are often forced to rely on costly alternative financial services, such as check-cashing services and payday loans. These services can eat up a majority of low-income individuals' take-home pay, as unbanked households spend on average 5% of their income on fees for alternative financial services.⁵³

Banking Access Among Pantry Visitors by Monthly Income



Nationally, unbanked and underbanked rates vary considerably by income, although access to mainstream financial services has increased over time for people of all income groups. Around 20% of households who earn less than \$15,000 are unbanked, compared to 9% of households with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000; unbanked rates for all other income levels are only 4%. Results from neighbor surveys at pantries in the SUN region mirror these national trends. A total of 25.9% of households who reported earning less than \$1,000 a month do not have a checking or savings account compared to 4.3% of households who earn more than \$1,000 a month.

There are significant differences in financial access rates by race and ethnicity. Nationally, unbanked rates for Black and Hispanic households are between 9% to 11% while unbanked rates for Asian and white, non-Hispanic households are between 2% to 3%. Black and Hispanic households are more likely to be unbanked than white households at every single level of income. These disparities by race/ethnicity are the result of historic marginalization, financial exclusion, and predatory inclusion in asset markets.^{54,55} Again, results from SUN county neighbor surveys mirror these trends as 33% of Hispanic households are unbanked compared to just 9% of white, non-Hispanic households.

The food pantry visitor survey did not ask why pantry visitors did not have a mainstream financial system checking or savings account. However, national surveys of unbanked and underbanked households reveal that the top reasons for not having a bank account include not having enough money to meet minimum balance requirements, lack of trust in banks, and high or unpredictable fees.⁵⁶

HEALTH CONDITIONS

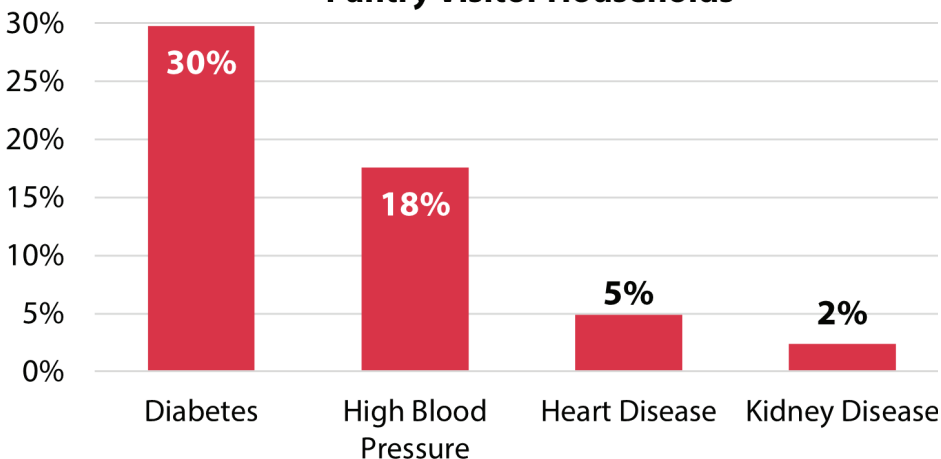
Health conditions are a major intersecting issue with food insecurity. Households who face food insecurity are more likely to experience chronic health conditions, due to a variety of reasons including less purchasing power to access a diet of sufficient quality and variety and chronic stress. These factors contribute to and are exacerbated by food insecurity.⁵⁷

In the SUN region, slightly under a third of all food pantry visitors reported that they or someone in their household has diabetes (30%) and almost a fifth (18%) of all pantry visitors have a household member with high blood pressure. An additional 5% reported a household member with heart disease. The estimate of 50% of households having household members with at least one member who has one of these three major health conditions is a low-end estimate, as survey respondents were unable to select multiple health conditions.

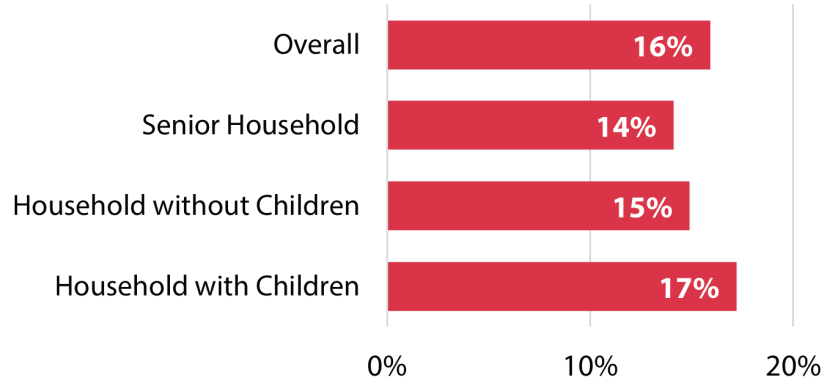
“I’m supposed to limit my pasta, but pasta is one of the cheapest things to make.”
–Interview Participant

Through surveys and interviews, neighbors discussed their challenges with balancing their nutrition needs and the expenses of many of the products they are supposed to consume. “I’m supposed to limit my pastas, but pasta is one of the cheapest things to make,” an interview participant shared. Another said, “I’m just glad you have fresh produce here because when I went to [another] food pantry it was all canned and processed items and I try to eat healthier.”

Prevalence of Specific Health Conditions among Pantry Visitor Households



Percent Reporting a Tradeoff Between Food and Medicine or Medical Care by Household Type



One pantry visitor relayed the negative impact that a reduction in SNAP benefits with the end of the SNAP emergency allotments had on their ability to make healthy food choices to help control her husband’s chronic disease. “We got extra, which actually helped. We got \$458 a month [in SNAP benefits], now we get \$20,” she said. “My husband’s supposed to be on a heart healthy diet. So that food is more expensive. Well, we’re off the heart healthy diet [now].”

Pantry visitors relayed that chronic health problems can make it more difficult for people to work and maintain transportation. The wide variety of issues connected to health show the importance of continuing to increase the healthfulness of pantry food and of the potential for partnerships with healthcare providers that can help neighbors prevent and manage chronic health conditions.

Although health conditions are a major issue facing food pantry visitors, economic tradeoffs between food and medicine or medical care were lower than for housing, utilities, and transportation. 16% of food pantry visitors reported having to choose between food and medicine or medical care in the last twelve months. Senior households are the least likely to have reported experiencing these tradeoffs at 14% compared to 15% for working-age households without children and 17% for households with children. This largely follows the patterns seen for other economic tradeoffs.

RETAIL FOOD ACCESS

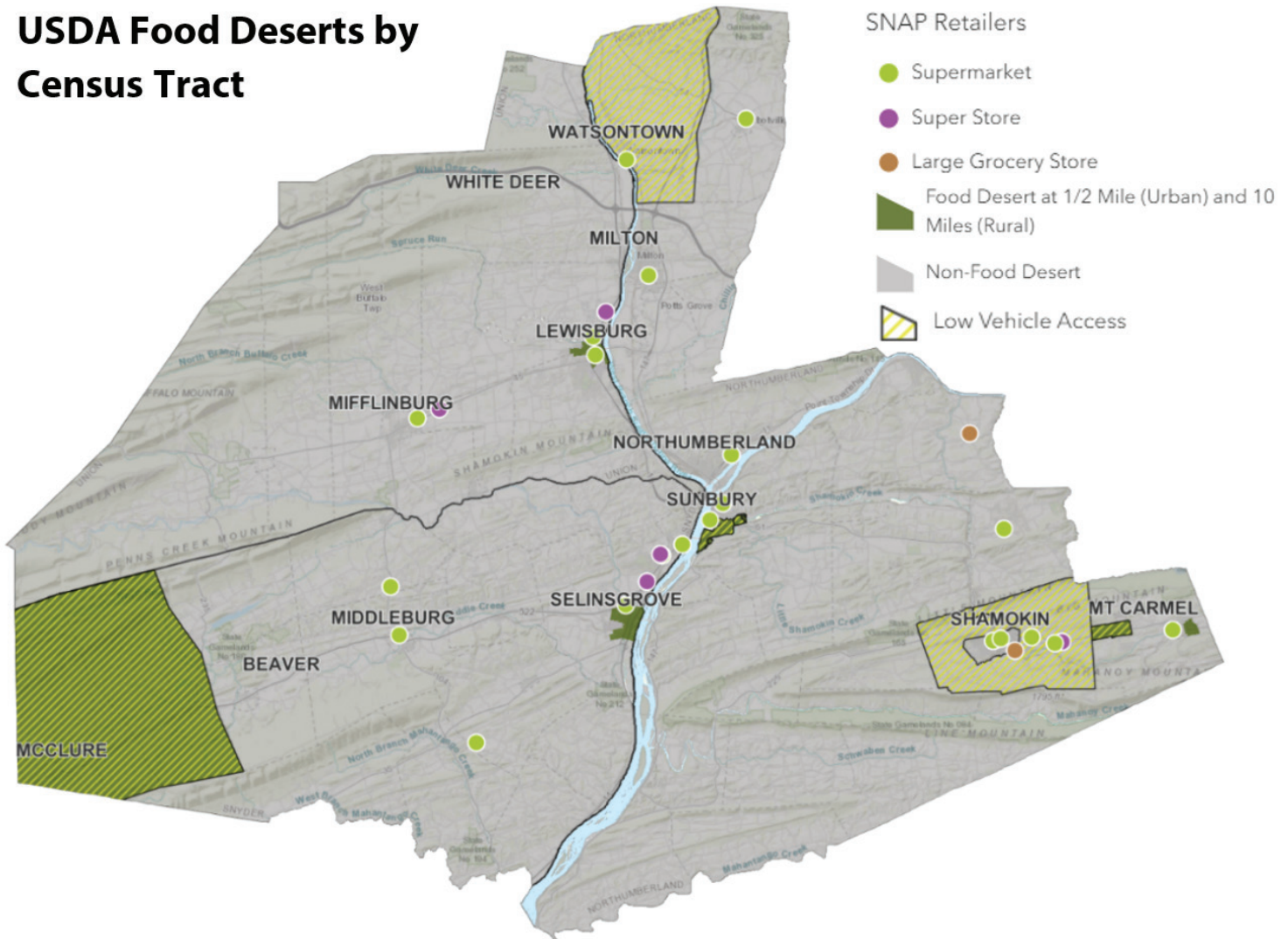
The USDA has several food desert definitions for low-income census tracts. The least severe is a low-access food desert, which is defined as a census tract in which at least 500 people, or 33% of the population, live further than a half mile (in urban areas) or ten miles (in rural areas) from the nearest grocery store.⁵⁸ The most severe food deserts are census tracts that meet the same distance and population criteria and have 100 or more households without access to a vehicle.⁵⁹ Although useful measures, there are also notable drawbacks to the USDA food desert methodology. The USDA definitions are area-based analyses with firm distance cutoffs, so they present a black and white dichotomy not necessarily reflective of real experiences.

The map below shows low-income low-access (LILA) census tracts at the least severe one-half and ten-mile food desert definition, as well as census tracts with low vehicle access, and SNAP retailer locations. There are only six census tracts which meet the least severe food desert definition, located in Mt. Carmel, McClure, Kulpmont, Selingsgrove, Lewisburg, and the census tract just north of Shamokin Creek in Sunbury. The McClure, Sunbury, and Kulpmont census tracts also have low vehicle access and are therefore the most severe food deserts.

New research in the field of food access has shown that demand-side solutions, like increasing purchasing power and income, are more effective interventions in food deserts than are placing a new grocery store in a neighborhood.^{60,61} Therefore, income-based solutions like Double-Up Food Bucks (DUFb), a program that integrates with SNAP to match purchases of fresh produce dollar-for-dollar up to a certain limit, could improve access more than would adding additional retail locations.⁶²

DUFb programs have been proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among participants⁶³ and to do so in a way that promotes choice and dignity. Over half of all states implement DUFb, but Pennsylvania is not one of them. While there are some smaller efforts at farmers' markets across the state, a DUFb program in the SUN region in partnership with grocery stores, corner stores, and farmers markets would improve choice options and address inequities in access to sufficient nutritious foods.

USDA Food Deserts by Census Tract





Intersecting and Upstream Issues Recommendations

Section 4 Finding 1: 87% of food pantry visitors in the SUN region work full time (20%), receive Social Security or a pension (47%), or receive Disability or SSI (20%). An additional 5% work at least part time. Just 4% of respondents cited being laid off or not being able to find work as a main reason for not working. Unemployment status, therefore, is a vanishingly small contributor to overall demand for charitable food services in the SUN counties.

There are significant differentials by household type – retirement income is the main income source for 82% of senior households. Disability or SSI are the main income source for 37% of working-age households without children, and full-time work is the main income source for 46% of households with children.

Recommendation: The charitable food system should highlight this data to reduce stigma and preconceived notions about pantry visitors, and to demonstrate the major barriers that people face in making ends meet. This data shows that activities focused on increasing employment status are less helpful than optional programs which help people find opportunities to find consistent and improved employment situations. Pantries should refer interested individuals to workforce development resources offered by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania rather than start their own new programs.

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



Section 4 Finding 2: Most households with children work full or part time, but still earn very low wages overall. A total of 44% of working households with children and who work full time earn less than \$24,000 a year (less than \$11.50 an hour) and 45% have incomes below the federal poverty line.

Fully 83% of households with children have incomes below 150% of the federal poverty line. The low wages and irregular work faced by these contributes to the fact that they face the highest rates of very low food security among all food pantry visitor household types in the SUN counties.

Recommendation: Low and minimum wage issues, as well as irregular hours and schedules have a major impact on food pantry visitors. Food security stakeholders should work to advocate for family-sustaining wages, including with business partners and donors. Other advocacy points that can increase the security of work are an increase in the minimum wage and “fair work week” legislation that requires companies to give employees their schedules at least two weeks in advance.

Coalition members could also work to facilitate engagement with pantry visitors about the issues that are most impacting them to inform advocacy and program design.



Section 4 Finding 3: The prevalence of disabilities among households who visit the charitable food system and the inadequacy of disability benefits to meet the basic needs of households that receive them is a major contributor to food insecurity among pantry visitors in the SUN region.

A total of 85% of food pantry visitors who cited Disability or SSI as their main income source live on less than \$2,000 a month, while 32% live on less than \$1,000 a month. Meanwhile, 69% of food pantry visitors who said they receive Social Security or a pension live on less than \$2,000, and 21% live on less than \$1,000 a month.

Beyond this, more than half (54%) of survey respondent households without children and about a quarter of households with children (28%) said they faced barriers to work relating to disability, but only 37% and 16% respectively were SSI or SSDI beneficiaries.

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

The disparity between the number of households who cited disability as a barrier to work and those who said they receive SSI or SSDI speaks volumes about the difficulty of applying and being approved for benefits. As of 2021, the final award rate for SSDI applicants was only 26.8%, and 12.2% of denials were for technical rather than medical reasons.⁶⁴ For SSI, the award rate was 30.7%, with a 13.7% technical denial rate.⁶⁵

Even among households who do receive benefits, payment amounts are low, and program requirements make it difficult to weather a crisis. SSI recipients must keep their assets, with scant exceptions for housing and transportation, below \$2,000 or risk losing their benefits completely, which prevents them from building a personal financial safety net.⁶⁶

Supporting legislation that would simplify the application process, increase benefit amounts, raise the SSI asset cap, and expand eligibility for and the flexibility of ABLE accounts, which are tax-exempt savings accounts for people with disabilities that do not count against the asset limits are all actions that could make a difference for disabled neighbors.



Section 4 Finding 4: Housing costs were the top economic tradeoff with food reported by SUN region food pantry visitors. Fully 34% of pantry visitors said they had to choose between utilities and food in the last year, while 22% said they had to choose between food and rent or mortgage. Housing costs were the leading concern among neighbors who answered a special survey question asked in Union County.

Recommendation: The charitable food system and other interested stakeholders should work to scale utility assistance activities already underway at many locations across the region. Stakeholders should advocate for policies that increase the supply of affordable housing across the region, as this represents one of the biggest concerns of vulnerable households across the region.



Section 4 Finding 5: More than half (55%) of all food pantry visitors in the SUN region reported having someone in their household who has at least one chronic health condition, such as diabetes (30%), high blood pressure (18%), heart disease (5%), or kidney disease (2%). Neighbors described needing to balance their nutritional needs with how expensive it is to eat the way they need to with their chronic health condition.

Accordingly, one interview participant said, “I’m supposed to limit my pastas, but pasta is one of the cheapest things to make.” One in six (16%) pantry visitors reported having to choose between food or medicine and medical care in the last twelve months. Senior households are again the least likely to be faced with this choice (14%) while households with children are the most likely (17%).

Recommendation: The charitable food system should continue to strengthen its partnerships with health providers across the region, as food insecurity and health have cross-cutting impacts.

This data provides major evidence that the charitable food system has a major role to play in working to address underlying and chronic health conditions. There are opportunities to address food insecurity as a social determinant of health through Medicaid 1115 waivers that provide funding to address food insecurity and other issues that impact long-term health and health spending.



Section 4 Finding 6: Kulpmont is the most severe retail food desert in the SUN region, according to the USDA. It is classified as a food desert more than a mile away from its nearest grocery store and more than 100 households without vehicle access.

Recommendation: Stakeholders should consider ways to address this gap, including but not limited to DUFEB at local markets (if any) or advocating for a retail presence in the region. More research will likely be needed to determine the best solution for this community.



CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024 Snyder, Union, and Northumberland (SUN) Community Hunger Mapping Report is the last piece of a multi-faceted project begun in April 2023 that sought to improve understanding of the charitable food network in the region through multiple methods, including analyzing publicly available data, incorporating external research, engaging with pantry managers and other system stakeholders, and most importantly, listening to and learning from the neighbors who visit food pantries across all three counties.

The work that went into this report was conducted with a spirit of service to those who visit the SUN region's charitable food network, with a specific emphasis on accurately depicting the reality of their lives, as well as providing an informative and actionable resource that can be used to improve food pantry experiences while striving toward ending hunger in this community.

Though this report is in some ways the end of this project, it is also a point of continuation; while the insights contained in this document are valuable resources on their own, dedicated implementation of its recommendations and evaluation of progress are necessary to truly create change for Snyder, Union, and Northumberland's food insecure residents.

This work was done in collaboration with key community leaders and a consultative group that supported this project, with its backbone formed by the Union-Snyder Hunger Coalition, the Union-Snyder Community Action Agency, and Central Susquehanna Opportunities, along with food pantries across the region, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, and other key stakeholders.

Ongoing collaboration will be the key to effective implementation. The coalition of stakeholders must continue to work together to intentionally carry out the recommendations made in this report and sustainably assess their effects if we are to make meaningful progress toward a central Susquehanna Valley in which no one worries about where their next meal will come from.

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