



# Food Insecurity in Dane County

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# INTRODUCTION

**Eating is one of the most fundamental human experiences, and food is a core aspect of family, culture, the economy, and our environment.**

Across the globe, access to food drives decisions about where people live and how communities develop. Access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant food is key to living a healthy, vibrant life and a critical dimension of our wellbeing.

**Despite tremendous wealth and economic prosperity in Dane County, not all households have equal access to food.**

There are several challenges that can limit food access, including income, access to transportation, and proximity to places that sell food. Additionally, preferences and variety matter: some people may have specific cultural or dietary needs that can further limit their options. These things must be considered in order to create an equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system.

## Goals of this report

1. **Provide an overview of food insecurity, its prevalence, and its impact on the people of Dane County.** Food insecurity data comes from a variety of sources and not all of it can be narrowed to the county level. Where appropriate, information about Wisconsin and the United States will also be used to present trends and an overarching picture of who is in need. This data provides ways to think about the scope of the issue, but it is also important to contextualize the impacts of food insecurity on people and our community.
2. **Present a framework for understanding why food insecurity exists and what can be done to address it.** This framework—four legs of a table that jointly support a food secure community—seeks to align the hunger prevention efforts of individuals and organizations across different sectors of the food system.

## The food security landscape has changed since our last report in 2016.

Since the last update of this report, the COVID-19 pandemic and new economic challenges have reshaped society and our understanding of food insecurity. There have been short-term changes to federal, state, and local programs that have given new insight into how food insecurity can be addressed and the costs to do so. In addition to updating past material, this report will also examine changes to our local landscape, while also understanding that food insecurity is an outcome related to the health of our food system. Dane County's total investment in the food system are explored more deeply in the [2023 Dane County Pandemic Food System Study](#) and a Dane County food system plan that is currently under development.

# PART 1: FOOD INSECURITY IN DANE COUNTY

According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security is the “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life.”<sup>1</sup> Conversely, food *insecurity* occurs when food access is insufficient or uncertain for at least one person in the household at some point in the year. Within food insecure households, it is more likely that one or more people will experience *hunger*, the body’s physiological response to not consuming enough food.

Expanded definitions may include concepts like cultural preference, nutrition, and sustainability.<sup>2</sup> In short, when households are food insecure, people worry about food running out, cut back on the size of meals, skip meals, or fail to have access to affordable food options necessary for their health.

## How is Food Insecurity Measured?

The US Census Bureau measures food security through a supplement to the Current Population Survey. Individuals are asked a series of questions about whether they have enough food, whether they ever need to cut back on the size or frequency of meals because they cannot afford food, and other concepts. The results will categorize a person as food secure, food insecure, or “very low” food security.

There are other sources of data about food access as well:

- *Food insufficiency* is calculated through a shorter version of the Food Security Supplement.
- Feeding America has created a tool called [Map the Meal](#) gap which estimates food insecurity at the local level and by race/ethnicity and by individuals and children.

Food insecurity data can be limited at local levels like counties and cities, so it is also valuable to look at other indicators that can offer additional insight into who is at the greatest risk for food insecurity. This can include housing, employment, or participation in nutrition assistance programs.

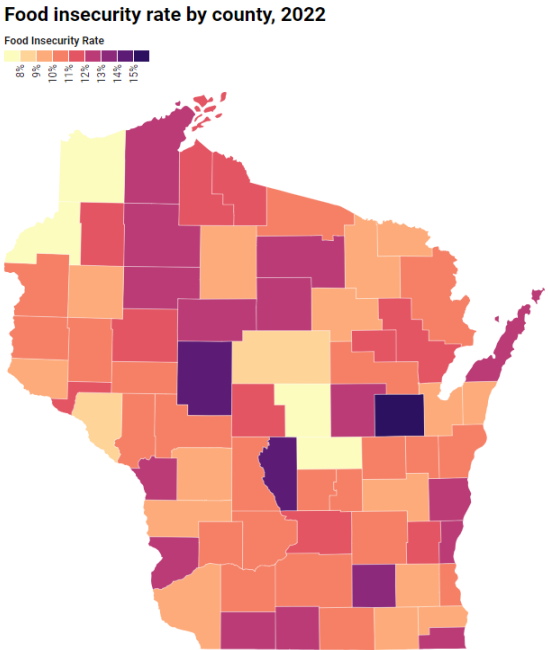
Due to data sources and limitations of when the most recent data was collected, this profile will move between national, state, and local data and across years for which the most recent information is available. The goal is to create a picture of local food insecurity through multiple points of reference.

## Who is Food Insecure?

The USDA estimates that 13.5% of Americans—over 44 million people—were food insecure in 2023. In Wisconsin, 10.7% of all households were food insecure in 2023.<sup>3</sup>

**In Dane County, 9.2% of all people and 12.6% of children were food insecure in 2022.**<sup>4</sup>

Dane County’s food insecurity rate is near the average compared to the rest of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.



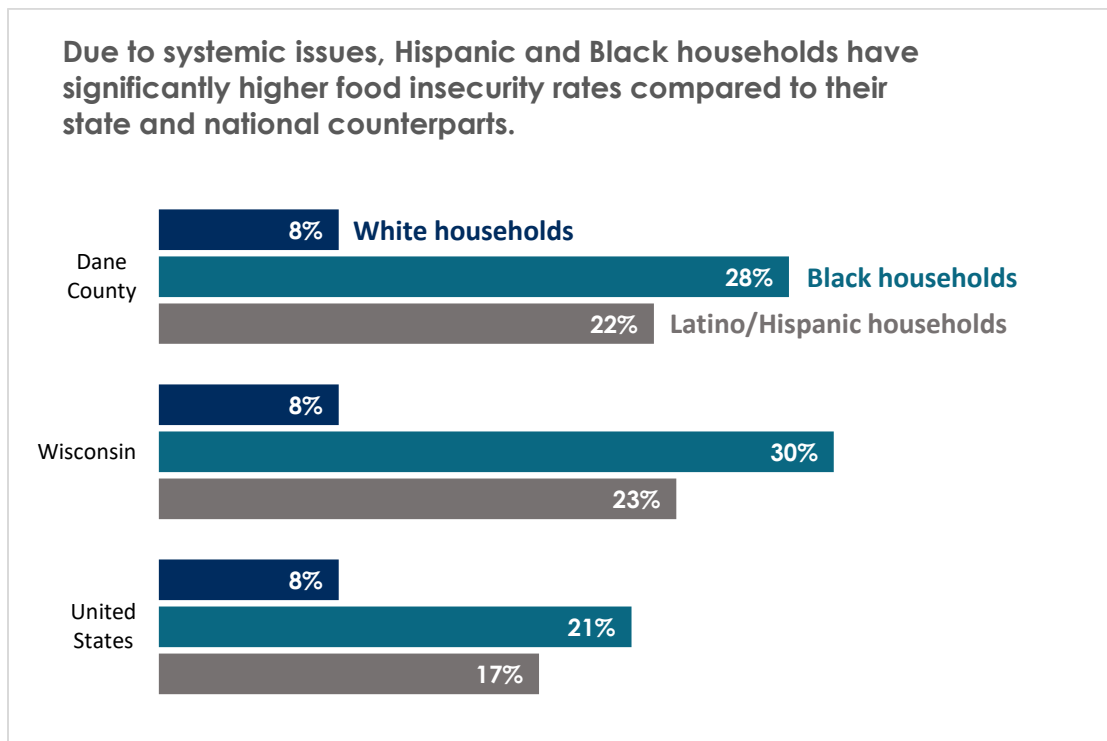
Source: Feeding America - Map the Meal Gap data, 2024

### Food insecurity doesn't affect us all equally.

Research suggests that adults and children who are food insecure are more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities, have lower income, and lack health insurance than people who were food secure.<sup>5</sup> In Dane County, we see that food insecurity is more prevalent among people of color, with 28% and 22% food insecurity among Black and Latino/Hispanic residents, respectively, compared to 8% among White residents.<sup>4</sup>

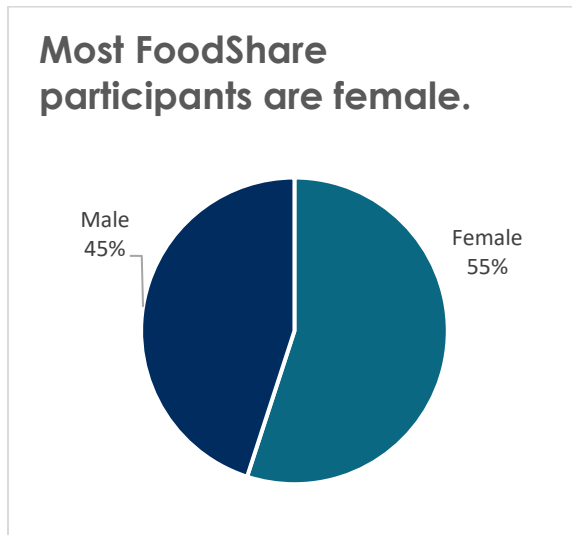
Wisconsin has a lower overall food insecurity rate than the United States, but disaggregating this data by race tells a more complete story.

While White households in Wisconsin have lower rates of food security than the national average, Hispanic and Black households have significantly higher food insecurity rates compared to their state and national counterparts. However, because white households substantially outnumber Black and Hispanic households in Wisconsin, the overall food security rate across all households appears low.

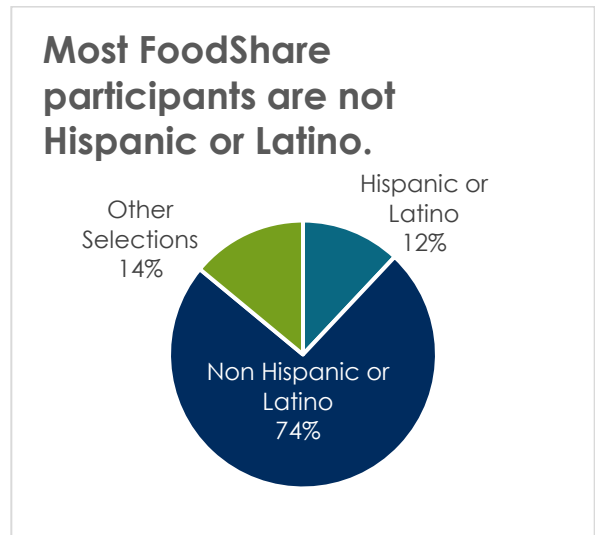


## FoodShare as an Indicator

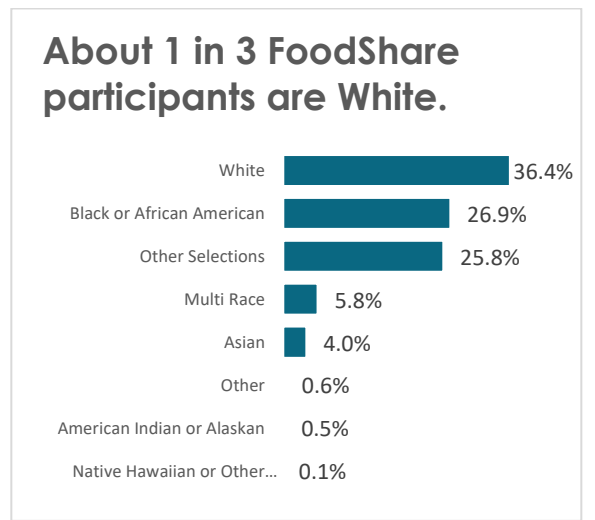
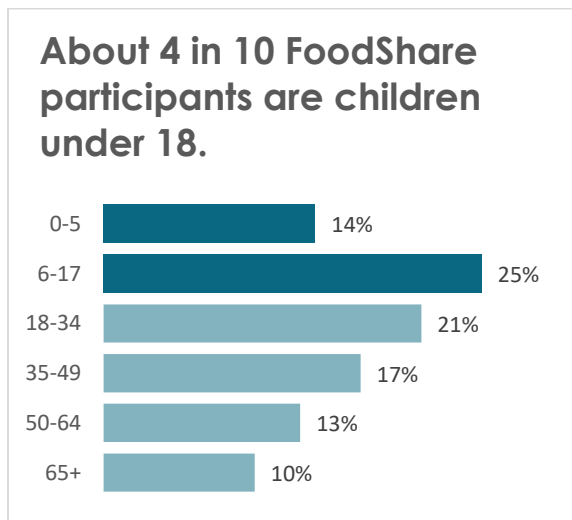
One of the key indicators for observing local change in food need is participation in FoodShare Wisconsin. FoodShare is Wisconsin’s name for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food benefits to income-eligible households. Individuals participating in FoodShare are at a greater risk for being food insecure. Fall 2024 data from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services provides a glimpse into the profile of people in Dane County who use this program:<sup>6</sup>



*Due to previous data reporting practices, at this time these data only reflect reported sex and not gender identity.*



*Other selections include users who selected “Unknown” or “Declined to answer” or didn’t select any ethnicity (“Not provided”).*



It is important to note that not every person that is eligible for FoodShare participates in the program. Additionally, certain groups such as non-citizens and college students may not be eligible despite having clear challenges with meeting their food needs.

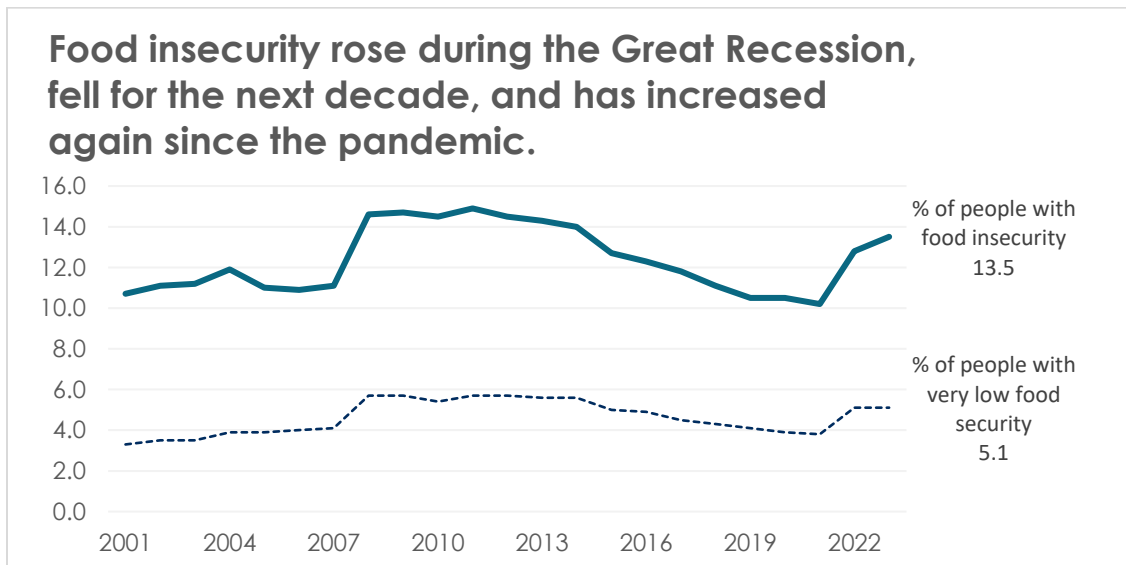
# Equitable Access to Food and the Root Causes of Food Insecurity

The unequal access to food is, at heart, an issue of inequitable distribution of resources. Income, economic opportunity, access to transportation, availability of retail outlets, and other factors are all dimensions of inequity that impact a household’s ability to find food. Race and geography can exacerbate these dimensions of inequitable access. The root causes of food insecurity and economic inequality stem from structural issues within the food system.<sup>7</sup>

## Recent Trends in Food Insecurity

Food insecurity responds to other economic forces and events, so the rate has changed over time.

- **From 2008 to 2012**, Wisconsin saw sharp increases in food insecurity in line with those experienced by the rest of the nation during the Great Recession. Worsening poverty, unemployment, and homeownership rates contributed to major household financial destabilization. Over time, the rate of food insecurity slowly declined as the economy improved and investments from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act materialized; however, food insecurity remained higher than it was prior to the Recession for most of the next decade.
- **By 2019**, food insecurity in Wisconsin was nearing the point it had been prior to the 2008 crisis. This milestone would prove short-lived.



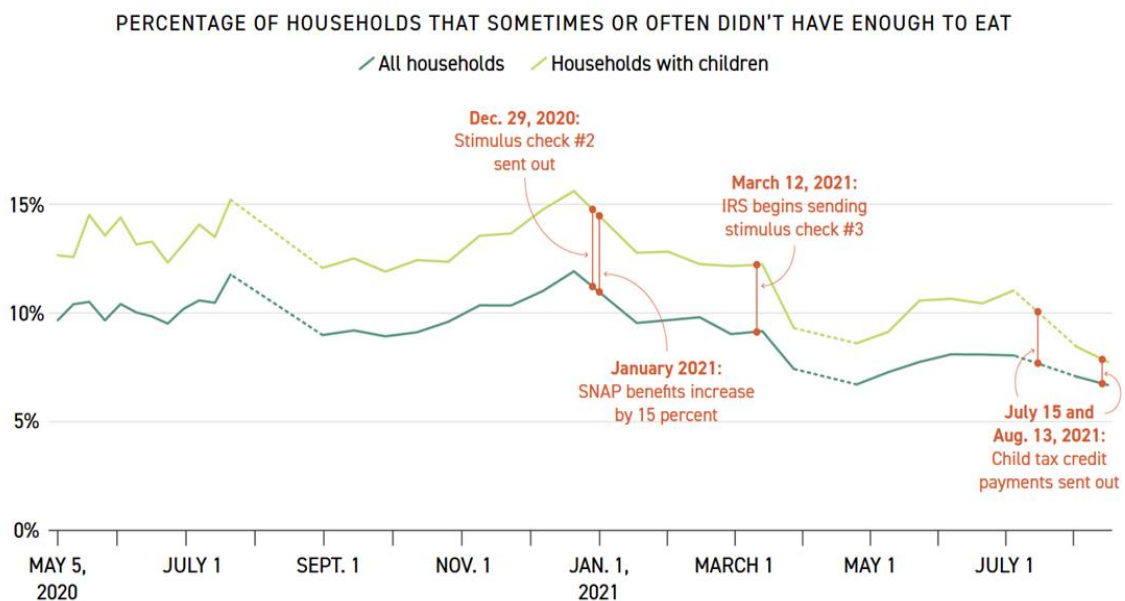
Source: Adapted from USDA Economic Research Service

- **In 2020**, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the globe. Beyond the individual health effects of the disease, there were many economic, environmental, and social consequences related to business closures, gathering limits, stay-at-home mandates, and isolation or quarantine protocols. Supply chain disruptions affected many Americans, as certain products became unavailable for extended periods. Millions of Americans experienced unemployment in the early stages of the pandemic, and people who were at risk for heightened food insecurity saw a worsening of their own situation as they now had to navigate crowded services and new

systems, such as drive-through emergency food distribution.

Families that were isolated or quarantined due to COVID-19 prevention protocols needed to find ways to meet their food needs without exposing others to infection. Schools, which serve as a primary source of food for many low-income families, grappled with providing meals to students during closures and with constantly evolving guidance on how to safely support students during mealtimes.

- **In 2020 and 2021**, federal stimulus helped stabilize the situation. This legislation helped offset lost income for Americans who had lost work, provided stimulus checks to many households, increased the Child Tax Credit, boosted federal benefits, expanded commodity foods in the emergency food system, and simplified school and summer meal programs for kids. Collectively, these efforts demonstrated that large-scale, targeted policy interventions can reduce food insecurity. By summer of 2020, food insufficiency showed declines after the early spike, and decreased even further in the first half of 2021:



Note: Data is plotted as of the end of the two-week survey collection period. Dotted lines represent breaks in survey collection.  
Source: Biweekly Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey of an average of 250,000 Americans  
By: Annette Choi/POLITICO

- **In 2022-2024**, as the pandemic era benefits and grants ended, there have been a number of after-effects Americans continue to grapple with. A high rate of inflation from 2021 to 2024 has increased the cost of living for most families, and estimates of food insecurity have risen in turn. While wages have increased on average, low-income households have been the slowest to realize these gains.

This has created new challenges, as individual households now need to spend more money to meet basic needs like food and housing. As would be expected, food insecurity increased significantly from 2021 to 2023, the last year for which data is available.



## Local Trends & Impacts

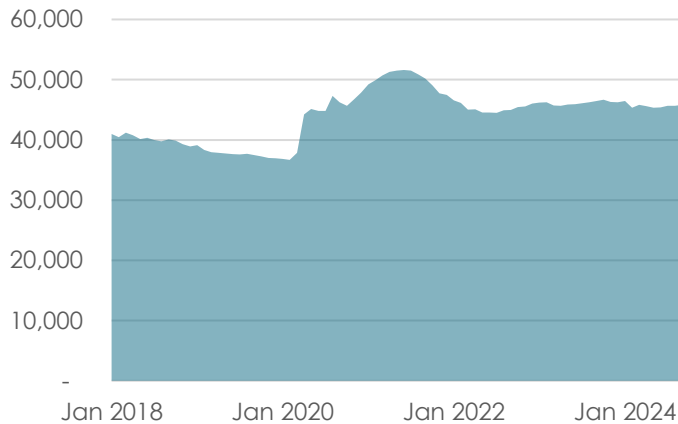
FoodShare and food pantry participation has increased.

From 2014-2019, FoodShare participation in Dane County steadily fell before rising again at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It and has remained elevated since.

Similarly, Dane County food pantries have also seen increased demand. From 2021-23, economic forces—including increases in food and transportation costs and a decline in overall food donations—had a dramatic impact on emergency food systems. In 2024, emergency food providers in Dane County have been raising alarms about an unprecedented increase in need and record high demand for food.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

### FoodShare participation in Dane County has increased since the pandemic.

Average monthly participants

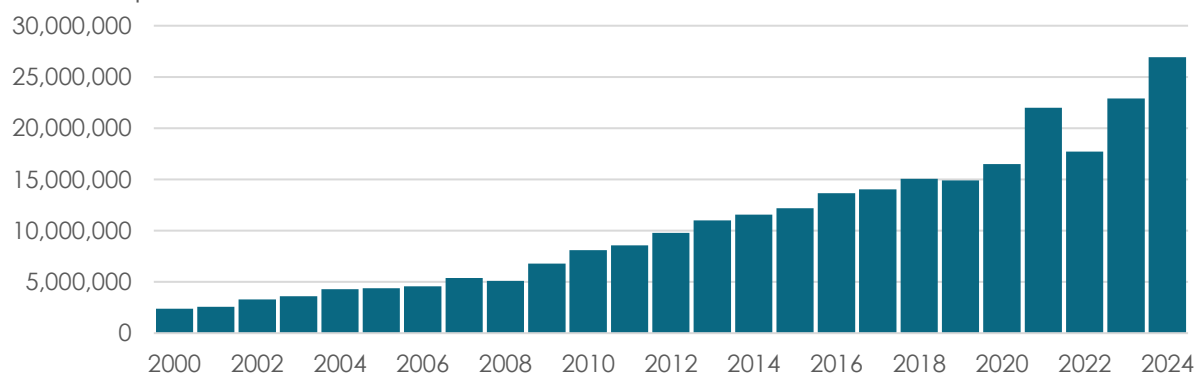


Among the six largest food pantries in the county, family visits have increased on average by 112% from 2021 to 2023.<sup>11</sup> During that same time, household visits reported by Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin’s food pantry partners increased by nearly 40% from the previous year.

To keep up with demand, Second Harvest has had to increase the amount of food it purchases and distributes. From July 2023 to June 2024, Second Harvest distributed 26.9 million pounds of food across its 16-county service area, including 13.6 million pounds in Dane County. This is the highest yearly distribution ever across its service area.<sup>12</sup>

### Food distributed by Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin has increased dramatically over time.

Annual pounds distributed in full service area



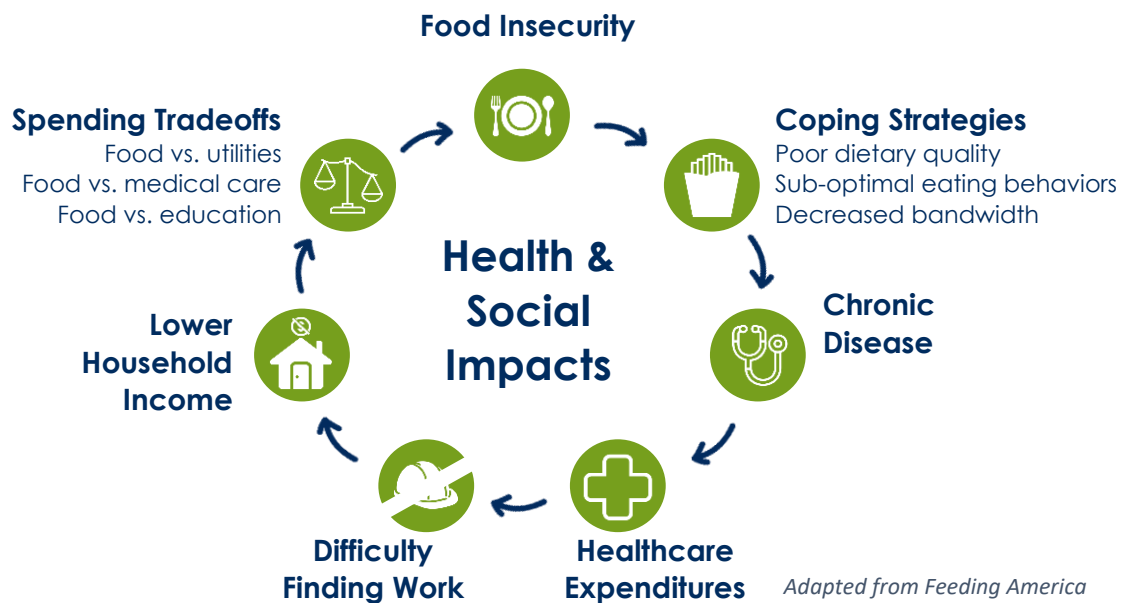
## Data Limitations

Some households may be hard to capture in traditional food insecurity measurements. This may include transient and hard-to-reach populations such as migrant workers, people without US citizenship (e.g. refugees, asylees, or undocumented immigrants), and higher education student populations. Local data on these populations is limited, but national data suggests that these groups experience disproportionate rates of food insecurity. For example, studies have reported very high rates of food insecurity among migrant farm workers.<sup>13</sup> In addition, according to national data, 41% of college students experience food insecurity.<sup>14</sup> More research is needed to understand food insecurity rates for these groups locally.

## The Health and Social Impacts of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity and poor health can negatively reinforce each other. According to Feeding America, food insecurity can lead to unhealthy coping strategies such as overeating foods high in sugar, fat, salt, or low in nutritional value. This can contribute to chronic disease, expensive healthcare costs, new financial challenges and, ultimately insufficient household income to make ends meet. This in turn may force spending tradeoffs, where food is often easier to cut back on than other issues, thereby worsening food insecurity.<sup>15</sup>

This can be an expensive cycle that can worsen their health over time. It can also create social costs related to health: the annual cost of disease-associated malnutrition in the United States is estimated to be over \$15.5 billion.<sup>16</sup> In Wisconsin, the annual healthcare cost associated with food insecurity in 2019 was estimated at \$687 million.<sup>17</sup>



## Food insecurity and children

Food insecurity is a challenge for anyone who is afflicted, but it can be particularly devastating for children.<sup>18</sup> In childhood, food insecurity can lead to a variety of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial stressors during critical developmental windows. Even when controlling for poverty, children from food insecure households have been shown to score lower on measures of math skills while also being more likely to have repeated a grade. Food insecure teenagers were more likely to have been suspended from school and have difficulty forming relationships. Children in food-insecure households may also experience disrupted eating habits that can range from mild to severe, and both children and adults in food insecure households have greater risk of nutritional deficits.<sup>19</sup>

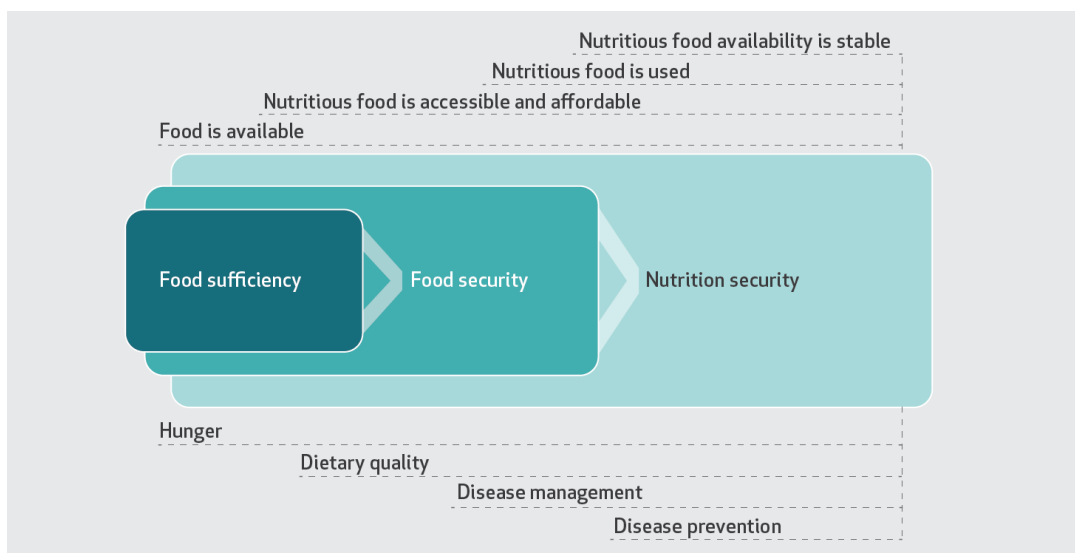
## Food insecurity and adults

Among adults, food insecurity is linked to an increased risk of pre-term births and delivering babies with low-birth weight. It is also linked to an increased risk of obesity and diabetes, and poorer quality of life. Counties with higher rates of food insecurity also have, on average, higher rates of diabetes, obesity, and rates of disability.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond direct health impacts, people who report periods of food insecurity tend to have lower wages or a greater risk of being unemployed, underemployed, and/or in jobs that do not offer employer-sponsored healthcare.<sup>21</sup> These people also may have more difficulty meeting other financial obligations, such as rent and childcare. Taken together, these challenges compound one another, and can make food insecurity both a symptom and a cause of other problems that impact health.

## Nutrition security is different from food security.

Having access to food does not necessarily mean that the food is healthy and eating healthy food does not necessarily mean it is enough to meet your needs. While food security relates to access to enough healthy food, *nutrition security* is defined as “consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent or treat disease.”<sup>22</sup> This tradeoff is the difference between undernutrition (the inability to eat enough food) and malnutrition (the inability to eat healthfully).



*The relationship between food security and nutrition security. These concepts overlap but also have differences.*  
Source: Health Affairs

Children and adults living in food insecure households tend to consume diets that are lower in fruits and vegetables, overall variety, and nutrient content.<sup>23</sup> Some members of food insecure households are at increased risk of negative nutrition-related and metabolic health conditions. As individuals and families are struggling to afford food, they may prioritize the cost of food over its nutritional value.

### Food as medicine

In recent years, healthcare systems have demonstrated a greater recognition of the relationships among food insecurity, nutrition, and health. Electronic medical records software like EPIC enables clinics are to screen for food insecurity and connect at-risk patients to resources such as Find Help and FoodShare Outreach. Additionally, “Food as Medicine” approaches have increased in Dane County healthcare settings and beyond.<sup>24</sup> These approaches aim to improve access to healthy foods for people with chronic diseases, by connecting them to programs with medically-tailored meals and produce prescriptions, when available. Making it easier and more accessible to make healthy nutritional choices can have lasting positive impacts on overall healthcare costs.<sup>25</sup>

# PART 2: FOUR LEGS OF THE TABLE: A FOOD SECURITY FRAMEWORK

There are many areas of work that directly or indirectly help improve community food security. A variety of private businesses, government agencies, and non-profit organizations are working on programs and efforts that will result in improved food security. It is important to help these groups identify their part in larger food system efforts so that they can align and coordinate their work for maximum impact.

In general, there are four key pillars, or “legs of the table” that combine to support a food security framework. These include:



**Economic security** – the overarching economic context that contributes to income, wages, personal finance, and the ability to have enough money to spend on food.



**Access to affordable and nutritious food** – the ability to live within a reasonable distance from places to buy or be provided food



**Nutrition assistance programs** – the safety net of federal programs that augment income and help supply food to those at risk of hunger



**The emergency food system** – the food banks, food pantries, meal sites, and shelters that help individuals and families when they aren’t able to get enough food from other sources.

By looking at each of these areas more closely, we can understand how food insecurity occurs in our community and some of the local solutions that can reduce it. Each leg of our table presents an opportunity to align groups and individuals who may see themselves as part of a narrowly focused mission rather than a larger system.

Layered into these four pillars are root causes of food insecurity and inequitable access to resources, such as historical and institutional marginalization of certain racial or ethnic groups. We will discuss each of the four legs of the table and how they work to support a more food secure community in more detail in the following sections.

## Leg 1: Economic Security



Food security is an economic issue. We see better food security when households have income above the federal poverty level, when local unemployment rates are lower and when wages are higher. If families struggle to make ends meet, acquiring sufficient food through conventional means can be difficult or impossible. A number of trends have emerged that put increasing strains on economic security, and therefore food security, in Wisconsin. Low-wage jobs, limited educational opportunities, and the rising costs of childcare, housing, energy, and healthcare all create financial challenges for families. A range of assistance programs— from tax credits, to subsidized child care, to public health insurance to energy assistance— can help fill the gap. Unfortunately, funding constraints, lack of awareness, and logistical barriers often limit participation in these programs.

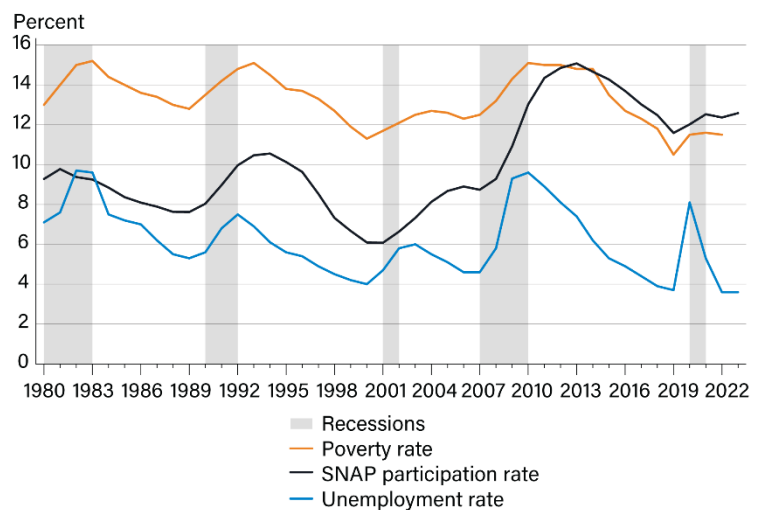
Our food system’s impact on the economy and our household financial security is complex. For example, the demand for abundant, cheap food can create downward pressure on the wages of food system workers in farm labor, retail, or food service industries. This in turn can increase the risks of poverty and food insecurity in the very people who produce and sell our food.

### Poverty, employment, and wages

Historically, food insecurity and nutrition assistance participation rates have closely mirrored poverty and unemployment. As the poverty rate declines, SNAP participation and food insecurity would be expected to decline as well. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on this relationship, however. In 2022-24, there are signs that the unemployment rate and food insecurity rate were not moving together as they have in the past. While unemployment has held below 4.0% in Dane County since 2021, food insecurity has risen in recent years.

Low income and high costs of living are important predictors of food insecurity. In 2022, while 11% of households in Dane county were below the Federal Poverty Level of \$27,750 for a family of 4, an additional 23% of households were considered to be below the United Way’s Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold. Those households earned above the Federal Poverty Level, but not enough to afford the basics where they live, contributing to food insecurity in many households that are not eligible for economic assistance programs. This suggests that current measurements of poverty may not fully capture needs.<sup>26</sup>

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation, unemployment, and poverty rates, 1980-2023**  
*Economic conditions influence participation in SNAP*



Note: SNAP participation is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. The SNAP participation rate is calculated as the average level of monthly participation in each fiscal year over the estimated U.S. resident population in July of the corresponding year. Grey vertical bars indicate years when recessions occurred (January–July 1980; July 1981–November 1982; July 1990–March 1991; March–November 2001; December 2007–June 2009; and February–April 2020). Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS, SNAP participation data; U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment rate data; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, population and poverty rate data.

Food insecurity is less common in households where at least one person is employed than in households where no one is employed. The risk of food insecurity is lower in states with higher prevailing wages. Improving access to employment and jobs with high wages is one of the most effective strategies to reduce food insecurity. According to Hunger Free America, a \$2/hour increase in wages for the fifty million lowest-earning Americans would create an extra \$208 billion in economic activity that could support increased household earnings for food and other living expenses.

### Economic assistance

A variety of assistance programs and tax credits are available to help people make ends meet. However, awareness of and participation in available programs is often low. When people receive available support, it can free up critical resources that can be used to meet food-related needs. One local resource to help simplify this process is to use the ACCESS Wisconsin [website](#)<sup>27</sup>, which allows people to quickly and easily test their eligibility for benefits, apply for benefits, check on their benefit status, and report changes to FoodShare, BadgerCare Plus, energy assistance, and several other benefit programs ([described further in Leg 3](#)).

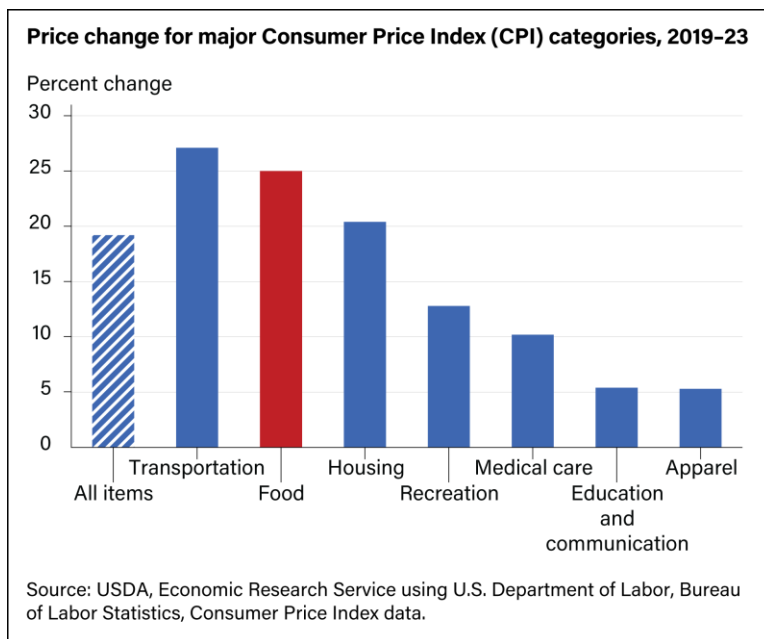
The Earned Income Tax Credit is one of the most important anti-poverty programs and is also essential for helping low-income families avoid food insecurity by providing financial support to some of the lowest income Americans.

The COVID-19 era further demonstrated the value of policy interventions that can have a measurable impact on food security, including Child Tax Credit payments and direct cash stimulus. These policies mapped clearly onto declines in food insufficiency. The termination of those policies also aligned with increases in food insufficiency.

### Inflation

Since 2020, nearly all expenses for the typical household have gone up, including housing, childcare, transportation, and food. According to the USDA, households spent, on average, \$50 per week per person on food in 2020. By 2022, this rose to \$70 per person per week. From 2019-23 the Consumer Price Index for all goods increased by more than 19%. Food items increased by 25%.<sup>28</sup>

Rising costs are the most harmful to households with the lowest incomes, worsening need for families that are already at risk for food insecurity. Higher costs also may tip the scales for people who are just above the poverty threshold into no longer being able to make ends meet. This increases the number of households that can qualify for benefits and/or may need to rely on emergency food.



## Leg 2: Access to Affordable & Healthy Food



To ensure food security, families need reliable access to sources of healthy and affordable food.

Living close to a supermarket or grocery store can reduce the risk of food insecurity.

A central problem for many communities and neighborhoods is the lack of local outlets that sell healthy, affordable food.

Researchers have described these areas as food deserts, food swamps, or even food apartheid, to highlight the structural injustices that create food deserts. The stores within a food desert, if they exist at all, may have higher prices and/or a limited variety and quality of foods. Food deserts are more common in rural areas and low-income neighborhoods in cities. They often lack healthy retail options, may be located far from supermarkets, or have limited transportation that restricts access to better alternatives.

In short, low-income families with fewer resources face greater travel burdens to reach places to buy food. People who have dietary or cultural preferences for specific foods may face additional challenges. Ultimately, when healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food is more difficult to access, families may choose less healthy or more expensive alternatives. This can create short term financial challenges and long-term negative health outcomes.

### Areas of Low Access

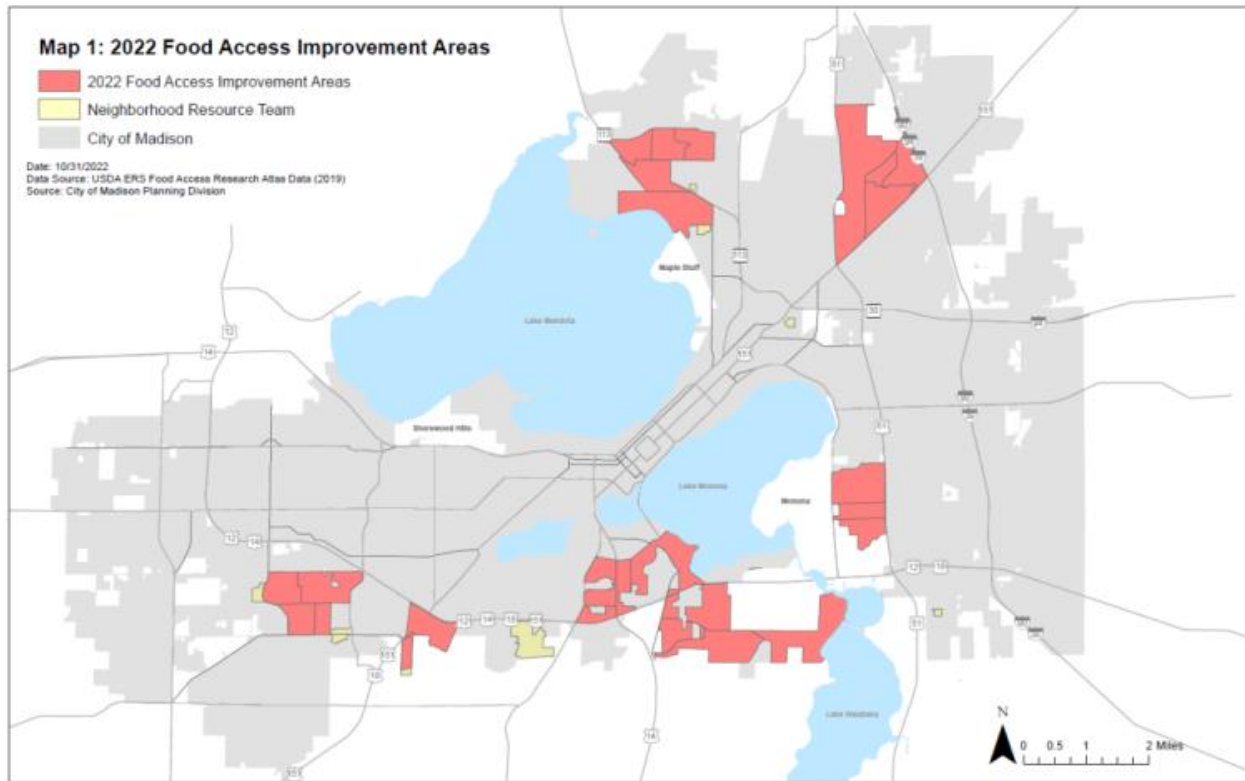
USDA's Food Access Research Atlas defines a "low food access area" as being far from a supermarket, supercenter, or large grocery store. The City of Madison's Food Access Improvement Map (FAIM) (next page) shows areas of the city that have a high proportion of low-income residents who live greater than a half mile from the nearest supermarket. The FAIM is used to identify where targeted investments can make the greatest impact in our food system.

### Food Access Terms

- **Food Deserts** geographic areas where consumers have relatively poor access to affordable and nutritious food
- **Food Swamps** communities that have some access to food, but it is of low quality or nutrition, for example, fast food restaurants and convenience stores
- **Food Apartheid** connects the lack of food accessibility in some communities to structural injustices and systemic racism, which contributes to the existence of food deserts and swamps
- **Food Justice** identifies the human right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food and considers the structural roots of the food system and why certain populations, such as communities of color and low-income communities, have more obstacles to navigate to access affordable and healthy food.



## Areas of the city that have a high proportion of low-income residents who live greater than a half mile from the nearest supermarket:



### Preparing for Future Emergencies

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chains for many products and food items became disrupted by work stoppages, consumer hoarding behaviors, and other distribution challenges. We saw access challenges unfold in three different ways:

1. People who were already food insecure now had less access to resources and more competition for emergency services.
2. People who were newly food insecure because of the ripple effects of pandemic related crises
3. The general public experienced grocery shortages in products for the first time in generations, which was a sobering reminder of how quickly the distribution of national and global food systems can be disrupted

In reflection of lessons learned during this period, it is clear that food access is an important dimension of preparedness in the face of future emergencies. Even in a region like Southern Wisconsin, which produces significant amounts of food, further planning is needed. More specifically, we need to determine threats and opportunities surrounding the resilience of our local food system, how foods can reach vulnerable populations during a crisis, and what types of investments our community can make to strengthen infrastructure and improve access to food.

## Food Access: Local Success Stories

By supporting healthy retail outlets in low-income communities, facilitating transportation, and promoting healthy food availability, communities can alleviate some problems of food deserts and food apartheid.

Food access can be tackled by making food retail outlets more available and transportation options more affordable and practical. When the grocery store and pharmacy near Allied Drive in South Madison both closed within a few years of each other, the City of Madison first invested in taxi vouchers and expanded bus lines to help families in the vicinity of those stores reach other supermarkets to buy their groceries. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic led to an expansion in popularity of grocery delivery options.



The City of Madison and Dane County have established a variety of programs and funds that support access to healthy food. Using the Food Access Improvement Map to identify areas for investment, the following programs have been created:

### The Healthy Retail Access Program

The City of Madison's Healthy Retail Access Program (HRAP), established in 2014 by the Madison Food Policy Council, provides small grants to retailers to improve access to affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant foods in low food access areas.<sup>29</sup> The program aims to:

- Increase healthy food access to low-income individuals and families
- Support food enterprise development and entrepreneurship
- Increase healthy food choice and improve health outcomes
- Increase culturally relevant foods in identified areas of focus

To date, HRAP has funded nearly \$1.5 million to support 16 projects in the Madison area. An evaluation of the program in 2022 showed that HRAP "improved access to fresh, healthy and culturally relevant foods in low food access neighborhoods through capital investments in small-scale neighborhood markets."<sup>30</sup> Some examples of success include:

- Luna's Groceries (pictured at right), which used funds to open a store in area of low food access
- Go-oh Groceries, which developed a previous nightclub into a neighborhood grocery store and community asset
- Madison Oriental Market, which renovated cold storage space to offer more fresh food



### Food System Microgrants

The SEED Grants (Madison) and Partners in Equity Food Grants (Dane County) provide funds to support new or emerging food system projects every year.<sup>31</sup>

A recent evaluation of the SEED Grant program found that it increases food for BIPOC households, builds organizational capacity to leverage additional funding, and strengthens the food system by fostering collaboration.<sup>32</sup>

## Non-traditional retail opportunities

Beyond grocery and convenience stores, there are other retail options that can help meet community food needs, including farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and nutrition incentives.

### Farmers Markets

- Farmers markets often have the benefit of being flexible, and can be established in locations based on local need and convenience. Because of this, local markets have long sought ways to expand the ability of low-income families to buy food at markets by using nutrition benefits like SNAP. This includes expanding services to accept FoodShare benefits and use of nutrition incentives like the Double Dollars Program.
- Farmers markets are also a vehicle for the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program and the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. These benefits allow families to spend on fresh fruits and vegetables.

### Double Dollars Program

- Since 2014, the City of Madison and Dane County have jointly funded Community Action Coalition to operate the Double Dollars Program, which increases the buying power of FoodShare users at farmers markets and grocery partners. This program supports both food insecure households and local farmers.
- Double Dollars has been given out an average of \$115,000 per year in nutrition incentives to Dane County shoppers since 2018.
- In 2024, the Wisconsin Legislature passed funding for a statewide nutrition incentive program that may be able to further expand access to programs like Double Dollars around the state.

### Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

- CSA subscriptions have gained popularity in the last 15 years. These programs allow people to buy a "share" of regularly delivered produce from a farm at the beginning of the growing season and then receive products based on that share over time and seasonality of the produce. Some healthcare providers now provide reimbursements for CSA memberships.
- In Dane County, FairShare CSA Coalition has implemented a way for CSA farms to redeem EBT benefits for CSA farms. FairShare also operates a Dane County-funded program called Partner Shares that provides some reduction in costs for low-income households.

### Community and school gardens

- These gardens are another way that families can learn to grow their own food, support their food budgets, and even increase the likelihood of eating healthy foods.
- Beyond improving food security, research demonstrates that gardens can be very useful in altering taste preferences among individuals by exposing people to different types of fresh food. When people—including young people—grow their own food, they are more likely to eat it.
- One way that governments can support community agriculture efforts is to help offset the costs of maintaining gardens. For example, the City of Madison has subsidized water utility costs at Madison-area gardens.

## Reducing Food Waste

Feeding America estimates that 38% of all U.S. food—representing 149 billion meals—goes uneaten each year.<sup>33</sup> Locally, the Dane County Department of Waste and Renewables estimates that 34% of the waste in the Dane County landfill comes from wasted food and other organic material, with half of that estimated to be from commercial settings and the other half from residential consumption.<sup>34</sup> By

observing patterns in food waste, we can better understand where food can be diverted and redirected to those who can use it before it is wasted. Systems-level solutions can be designed to recover and divert, edible, safe, and healthy food that would otherwise be wasted, and direct it to support families and individuals in need.

[Healthy Food for All](#), a Dane County organization operating out of the FEED Kitchen, is a leader in food recovery. They support the repackaging of cafeteria food from corporate campuses and coordinate a county-wide gleaning program to gather food that would otherwise go to waste from farmers and businesses. This food is then shared with emergency food partners for sharing with people who can use it. For more information on food waste efforts, please see our [blog series](#) on this subject.

## Leg 3: Nutrition Assistance Programs



The federal government has long recognized that some households do not have enough income to meet their food needs and some groups are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. A number of nutrition assistance programs have been designed to provide food resources to low-income families. When households lack sufficient income to meet basic needs, the federal nutrition programs provide essential food resources to protect and enhance food security.

The key to these programs' effectiveness is their ability to provide households with significant amounts of supplemental food assistance through normal, non-emergency channels such as grocery stores, schools, daycare providers, community centers, and home-delivery for place bound seniors and people with disabilities.

### Barriers to participation

Unfortunately, not everyone who could benefit from nutrition assistance participates in it. Some individuals may be struggling financially but still not meet the eligibility criteria. Feeding America estimates that 42% of people experiencing food insecurity had household incomes *above* the SNAP threshold in Dane County in 2022. This figure has risen in recent years, and more people have had to turn to emergency food assistance to meet their food needs.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, many people who are eligible for nutrition programs don't enroll due to barriers such as stigma, complicated enrollment processes or eligibility criteria, limits on benefits, and limited availability of programs in some communities.<sup>36</sup> [FoodShare outreach programs](#) can help people with navigating the application process.

### Nutrition Programs at a Glance

The federal government has created a number of different nutrition programs to help serve different populations. These include:

#### **SNAP: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

- Known as FoodShare in Wisconsin, this is the largest and most effective federal anti-hunger program. Unlike some programs, funding is available so that everyone who is eligible for SNAP can receive benefits. Once enrolled, participants receive monthly benefits in the form of an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card that they can use to purchase food through at retailers like grocery stores and some farmer's markets.
- According to the USDA, the SNAP program increases food security and is associated with improved health and reduced healthcare costs<sup>37</sup>. The majority of SNAP households include children, so it is a direct investment in preventing child hunger.<sup>38</sup>

- In 2023, an average of 46,135 recipients received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits in Dane County each month.<sup>39</sup> Over the last 5 years, the average allotment of FoodShare benefits was \$261 per household per month.

### School Meals

- There are two primary school meals programs: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). These programs provide free or reduced-cost meals to students from households with qualifying income levels. See side bar for more information.
- At the start of the 2023-24 school year in Dane County, 32% of all public school students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. In the Madison Metropolitan School District, this number jumps to 53%.<sup>40</sup>
- [Read more on school meals below.](#)



### WIC: The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

- WIC provides resources for pregnant or lactating people and their infants and children up to 5 years of age. WIC resources include breastfeeding support, food benefits, healthcare referrals and nutrition education. WIC has been shown to improve birth outcomes, support more nutritious diets, and improve access to healthcare, and may reduce food insecurity.<sup>41</sup>
- In 2022, a total of 2,016 women, 1,309 infants and 3,831 children 1-5 years old participated in WIC in Dane County.<sup>42</sup>

### Additional federal nutrition programs

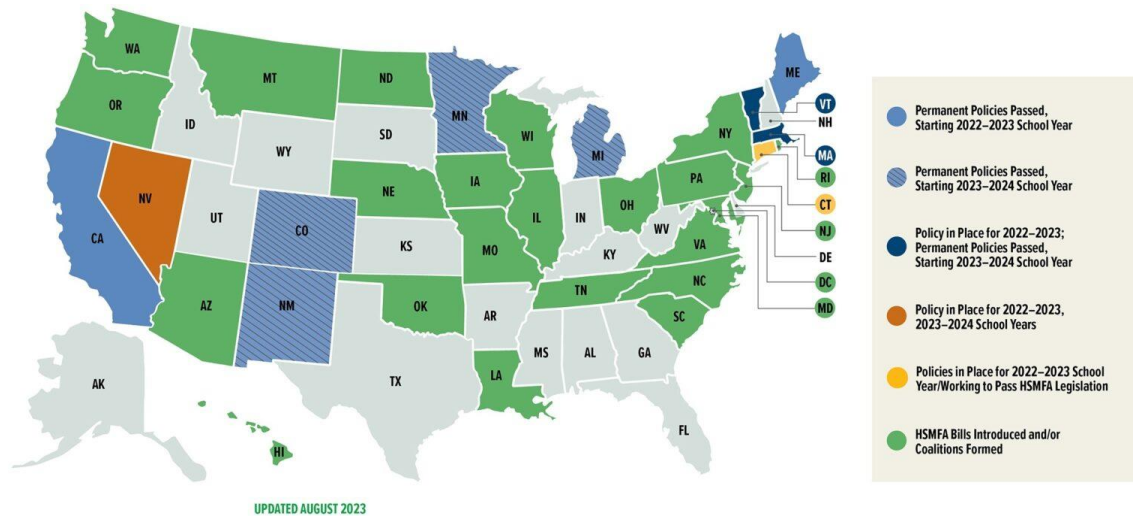
- Senior Meals
- Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Summer Food Service Program
- Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Program
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and other commodity programs

# School Meals

According to the Food Research & Action Center, school lunch is associated with numerous benefits to students, including reducing food insecurity, improving health and ability for children to learn, and having a positive impact on students’ consumption of fruits and vegetables.<sup>43</sup>

However, only families making less than 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) are eligible for free meals, and families making less than 185% of the FPL are eligible for reduced-price meals. These eligibility requirements may not reflect the full need for this resource for families above these thresholds. A USDA study found that a third of households that have to pay for school meals found it difficult to pay for other expenses.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, while 35% of children qualified for free or reduced lunch in Dane County in 2022, an additional 42% of food insecure children were in households with incomes above 185% of the FPL, making them ineligible for free or reduced school meals but still at risk for hunger.<sup>45</sup>

In 2020-21, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA enacted free universal school lunch across the county. This experiment demonstrated the efficacy of providing free meals to all students, which led to a national decrease in food insecurity among households with children. When the waiver expired in June 2022, participation rates fell and household food insecurity has since steadily risen.<sup>46</sup> Concerningly, Wisconsin’s ratio of schools participating in the School Breakfast Program compared to those who participate in the National School Lunch Program dropped from 51.6% in 2021-22 to 40.5% in 2022-23<sup>47</sup>.



In Wisconsin, the [Healthy School Meals for All](#) initiative is pushing for state policy that would again make school meals universally free, joining many other states (and countries worldwide) that already have universal school meals in place or are in the process of advocating for similar legislation.<sup>48,49</sup>

In the meantime, schools and school districts can apply for the [Community Eligibility Provision](#), which allows high-poverty schools and districts to serve free breakfast and lunch to all enrolled students without requiring individual household applications.<sup>50</sup>

## Leg 4: The Emergency Food System



Emergency food assistance includes food or meals provided to people by charitable agencies and non-profit organizations. It is distributed at food banks, food pantries, schools (via markets/pantries on site, as well as backpack, snack, or other programs), meal sites, and shelters. Most of these groups rely on a combination of volunteers and paid staff to sort, store, and distribute food. The food itself comes from multiple sources, including public donations, commercial donations, government commodities, and food that is purchased in bulk with financial donations. It is typically collected at food banks and then distributed to other partners, some of whom have their own donation programs as well.

Emergency food was historically intended to serve as a short-term food source and nutritional safety net for all families. Unfortunately, during challenging or uncertain economic conditions, households may need to rely on emergency food for longer periods. This creates ongoing strain on the safety net and stretches charitable organizations that are trying to meet the community need.

Today we recognize that the conditions that lead individuals and families to seek support from emergency food providers are varied and complex.



In Dane County, the primary food bank is Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin. Second Harvest works with over 125 food pantries and other distribution sites. Food pantry distribution models vary but can include in-person shopping, pre-packaged distribution of a set of available items, drive-thru distribution (which became more common during the COVID-19 pandemic), and mobile pantries, which involves delivery vehicles making regular stops in areas that may not have the resources for a pantry, such as rural and suburban areas with fewer resources.

To help find food pantries that can best serve families in Dane County, Public Health Madison and Dane County distributes a [Dane County Food Resources Guide](#) that can help individuals find resources in their area. [United Way's 2-1-1](#) services is another tool that individuals can use to identify emergency food as well as other possible resources to assist with housing and utility costs.

### Barriers to Emergency Food Access

The largest barriers to accessing emergency food are stigma and knowledge of what is available. One study found that almost two-thirds of adults experiencing food insecurity didn't access charitable food because they didn't feel comfortable doing so.<sup>51</sup> The same study found that around the same proportion of adults experiencing food insecurity were unaware of community food resources.

Another potential barrier is the varying and inconsistent requirements to participate. Some pantries have income restrictions and/or registration requirements, while other pantries ask no questions. For example, pantries distributing federal commodities have requirements to collect and report certain

information. However, starting in 2024, Wisconsin Department of Health Services has reduced reporting requirements, which will hopefully improve the client experience in this regard.

### Local food sources for emergency distribution

Many food banks have started to source more local food through “Farm to Foodbank” programs. Food banks recognize the importance of supporting local growers, which strengthens the local economy and adds infrastructure and resilience into the local food system. In turn, partner food pantries and their guests benefit from fresh, nutritious, local, and culturally relevant produce and food.



During the pandemic, Second Harvest received funding through Dane County’s American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to purchase local food. While ARPA funding has ended, Second Harvest continues to prioritize locally sourced foods through general purchasing or specific programs. For example, the Market Harvest purchases unsold produce at the end of a weekly farmer’s market in Madison and brings it to one of their nearby pantry partners for distribution. More information about Second Harvest’s expansion of this work can be found in the Dane County Pandemic Food System Study.<sup>52</sup>

### Challenges and opportunities in emergency food

In many ways, the emergency food system is the leg of our food security table that is the most dependent upon the others. Demand for emergency food will go up when unemployment is high or wages don’t match the costs of living. Similarly, when access to affordable or nutritious food is limited, or people are not participating in the nutrition programs they are eligible for, they may need to rely more on emergency food to meet their needs. Being forced to react to shifting conditions elsewhere in our food system is challenging for the emergency food system and can create difficulties in meeting demands for food. This is further complicated because of the reliance on donated food, money, and volunteer time to operate these programs. These things can be slow to shift and are vulnerable to rapidly changing conditions elsewhere.

Charitable food organizations typically rely upon a volunteer workforce that may be supported by limited paid staff. These individuals work together to make decisions about planning and operating food distributions. Volunteer recruitment, retention, and training is critical. Many food bank and pantry volunteers are seniors and retirees. This created a new challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, as older adults were told to avoid crowded indoor spaces given their increased risk of health complications. Today, there remains a concern nationwide about volunteer shortages and sustainability during emergencies. The City of Madison, UW-Madison, and other institutions have supported increased volunteerism by connecting individuals to opportunities.

Because of these challenges, emergency food providers are forced to constantly seek new and varied sources of food and fundraising while also maintaining a critical volunteer labor force. By working across our other food security table legs to identify new sources and efficiencies in food donation, increasing outreach for federal nutrition programs, and maintaining robust volunteer recruitment efforts, emergency food systems are more likely to remain sustainable.



It will also be valuable to connect our emergency food system partners into a larger conversation about ways our food system can align for to create food security in our community. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Health Madison and Dane County has convened the Dane Food Access Network, which uses the Four Legs of the Table model to connect different types of food access agencies into an ongoing conversation that increases alignment, awareness of work, and collective impact. As agencies improve relationships and shared vision between emergency food providers, schools, and other organizations involved in serving low-income populations, they can increase communication, share data, and collaborate in new ways.

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to food security, Dane County has many strengths. The median income is higher than many other places in Wisconsin, and the county is one of the larger agricultural production counties in the United States. As demonstrated through our food councils, large food pantry network, nationally known farmers market, and numerous food system-supporting organizations, we live in a community that cares about food security. These strengths highlight our capacity to support a local food system where food is abundant and available for all who need it.

Unfortunately, there are also many challenges unfolding that are negatively impacting food security. The rising cost of living in the area is straining household budgets, and the population of Dane County is growing quickly. The result is greater numbers of food insecure households, and greater strain on our emergency food systems.

Additional investments and cooperation across private, public, and non-governmental agencies are needed to meet the increasing food demands of our growing community. Using the framework to support infrastructure and planning efforts for local anti-hunger initiatives can align their work around the four legs to improve the food security table for everyone.

Ultimately, we want Dane County to be a food secure community with an equitable and sustainable safety net that is available for all people when they need it.

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