



Food Insecurity in Dane County

AN OVERVIEW

Dane County, a powerhouse of agricultural production in the United States and the fastest-growing county in Wisconsin, is also home to many people that may not know when or where they will have their next meal.

The high cost of living, barriers to access, and lack of awareness of available resources often makes food one of the first things to get scaled back when money is tight. People in food insecure households worry about running out of food without having money to buy more, cut back on the size of meals, or skip meals.

This summary and the connected report outlines the scale of food insecurity in Dane County, describes some of the consequences for health and community well-being, and offers a framework for a food secure community.

Food Security Defined

Food security is access to sufficient food for a healthy and active life for all household members at all times. **Food insecurity** occurs when at least one person in the household experiences insufficient or uncertain access to food at some point in the year.

FEBRUARY 2025



FOOD INSECURITY HAS RISEN TO HIGH LEVELS



Nearly one in ten people in Dane County were food insecure in 2022.

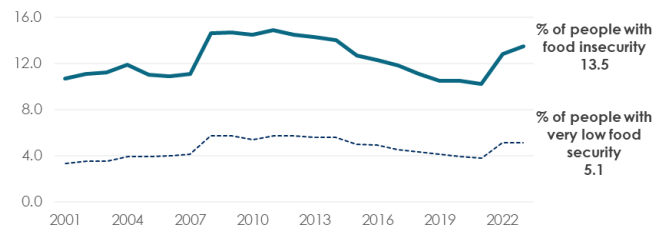
12% of Dane County children were food insecure in 2022.

Dane County emergency food distribution hit an all-time high in 2024.

Food insecurity spiked during the Great Recession before slowly decreasing then rising again during the pandemic.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, many people found themselves food insecure for the first time and those who were already struggling faced greater challenges. Federal stimulus, new programs, and policies that supported greater participation in nutrition assistance helped stabilize the situation for several years. Unfortunately, the conclusion of those pandemic-era benefits coupled with increased inflation has led to another dramatic rise in food insecurity since 2021.

Nationally, food insecurity has risen with recessions and increased during the pandemic.

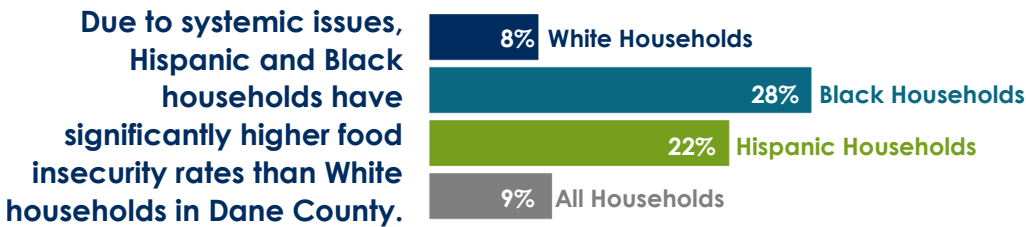


The record levels of nutrition assistance and pantry use in Dane County reflect this nationwide trend.

SNAP (known as FoodShare in Wisconsin) participation rates increased at the start of the pandemic in 2020 and have remained elevated. The six largest food pantries in the county reported an 112% average increase in family visits from 2021 to 2023. Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin distributed 26.9 million pounds of food to pantry partners across its 16-county service area, including 13.6 million pounds in Dane County from July 2023 to June 2024, the highest yearly distribution ever.

FOOD SECURITY, EQUITY, & HEALTH IMPACTS

In 2023, Dane County’s food insecurity rate (9.2%) was lower than Wisconsin (10.7%) and the United States (13.5%) as a whole, but the overall rates hide underlying inequities. White households have similar rates of food security to the state average, but rates among Dane County Hispanic and African-American households are significantly higher than national rates among these groups. White households substantially outnumber Black and Hispanic households in Dane County, so the overall food security rate across all households doesn’t paint the full picture for everyone.



Health & Social Impact

For Children: Food insecurity can dramatically shape future prospects for well-being. In childhood, food security supports physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Even when research controls for poverty, children from food insecure households are more likely to have challenges in school and learning.

For Adults: Food insecurity is linked to higher risk for obesity and chronic disease, including heart disease, diabetes, and their complications (e.g., kidney disease, stroke, retinal disease, congestive heart failure, and physical disability). Food insecurity predicts lower quality of life, including lower wages. Among pregnant people, food insecurity can increase risks for low birth weight and premature birth.

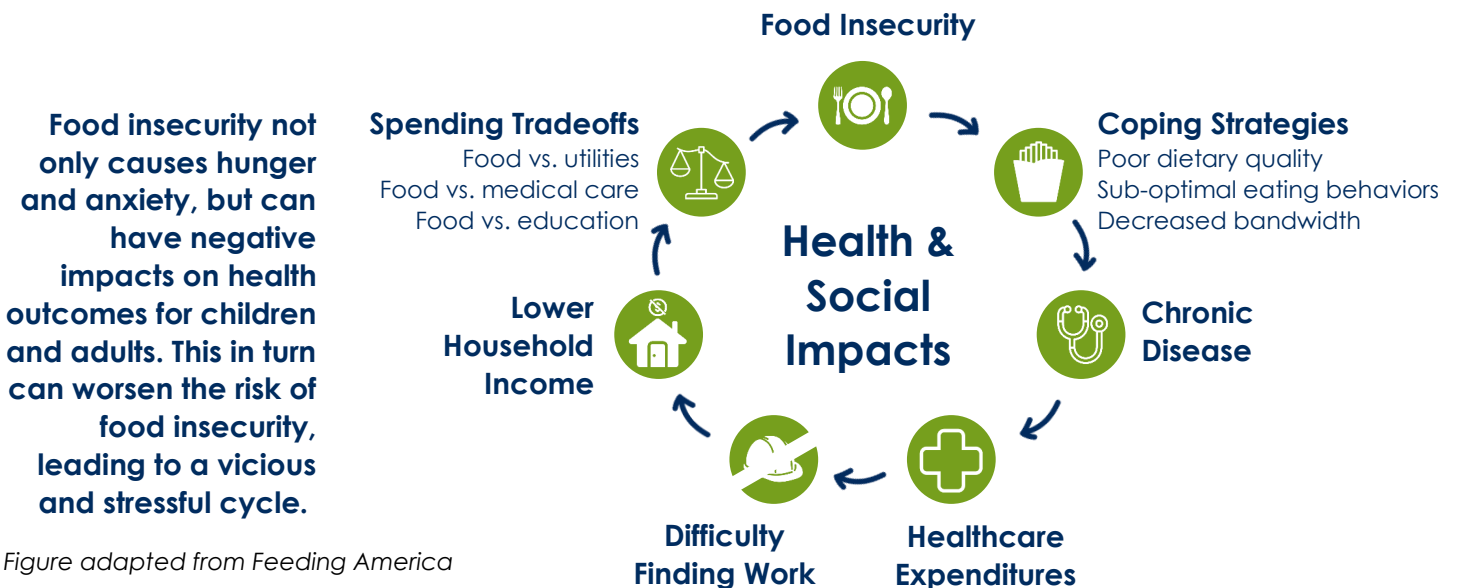


Figure adapted from Feeding America

FOUR LEGS OF THE TABLE: A MODEL FOR FOOD SECURITY

Economic and social factors influence rates of food security. Specific strategies can contribute to community food security. To understand major parts of the food system that affect food security, it is helpful to think of them as four legs of a table that work together. Absent any of the legs, the table would not be on a steady foundation.



Economic Security – an individual or family’s income, wages, personal finance, ability to access credit and generate wealth, all which influence the ability to purchase food.



Access to Affordable & Nutritious Food – the ability to live within a reasonable distance from stores, farmers’ markets, restaurants or other retail outlets that sell foods that are both affordable and nutritious.



Nutrition Assistance Programs – the safety net of federal programs that augment income and help supply food to those at risk of hunger. Examples include SNAP (FoodShare), WIC, and free and reduced-price meals in schools.



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.

Local Solutions

Madison and Dane County are working to address food insecurity in a variety of ways:

- Local government leadership through food councils & programs
- Supporting a robust emergency food system including pantries and other institutions
- Increasing access to nutritious and culturally responsive foods
- Investing in infrastructure
- Strengthening local food system partner networks

More about these programs and other ways that the Four Legs can be used to identify and address hunger and food insecurity can be found in the full version of this report.

[Read the Full Report](#)

