

# LEBANON COUNTY COMMUNITY HUNGER MAPPING FINAL REPORT

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



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## Introduction

**One in ten (9.8%) Lebanon County residents experiences food insecurity, and a similar proportion (9.7%) visited a food pantry in the last year.** In total, nearly 14,000 individuals in the county are impacted by food insecurity and the charitable food network's response to it. Importantly, food insecurity does not impact people of all ages, household types, geographies, or race/ethnicities equally. With this understanding, this report assesses the causes and distribution of these differences and discusses ways stakeholders can work to reduce these inequities.

Given a problem of this breadth and complexity, it is critically important for stakeholders in the charitable food network to better understand the issues at play. This report aims to provide that understanding and to chart a path forward to reducing food insecurity in the near and long-term.

The voices of neighbors who currently experience food insecurity, as gathered through surveys conducted at food pantries and community locations, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, are spotlighted throughout this report. Through agency surveys and interviews, the perspectives of charitable food providers are also included. Alongside these qualitative methods, innovative quantitative analyses regarding access to pantries across a variety of metrics and participation in government programs at sub-county and pantry levels are also used, resulting in a final report that leverages a mixed-methods approach that brings both quantitative rigor and robust qualitative components. All this work was done with the specific aim of listening deeply to food insecure neighbors in Lebanon County and bringing their thoughts, ideas, and needs to the fore.

Merely understanding the causes and scope of food insecurity in Lebanon is not enough to create a county where no one is hungry. To help make progress toward that goal, this report also provides actionable recommendations around better serving and improving the experiences of the neighbors who utilize Lebanon County's charitable food network in the short term as well as eliminating food insecurity in the long term.

Meaningful progress toward ending hunger will require intentional, sustained collective efforts by the entire Lebanon County community, including social service organizations, health systems, government officials, concerned citizens, and more. Throughout this work, the Lebanon County charitable food network will build on its existing strengths while seeking continuous improvement as it strives to ensure that everyone in the county has enough nutritious food to live a healthy life, free of worry about how they will get their next meal.

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

1. What is the extent of food insecurity in Lebanon County, and where in the county is it concentrated?
2. Who in Lebanon County is most impacted by food insecurity? How do food insecurity rates and the main drivers of food insecurity differ by age, race and ethnicity, or other factors?
3. How accessible is charitable and retail food in Lebanon County and how does access vary in different areas of the county? 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 Lebanon County? 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 county? What is the charitable food system's role in this space?
6. What other issues impact food insecurity in Lebanon County? What can the charitable food system and other relevant stakeholders do to better address the root causes of food insecurity?



## Executive Summary

**The highest food insecurity areas in the county are concentrated in Lebanon City, West Lebanon, Palmyra, East Hanover, and Myerstown.** These areas contain 26% of the population of Lebanon County but 53% of all food insecure individuals. Lebanon City is home to 18% of the total population but 39% of all food insecure individuals in the county.

**Child food insecurity in Lebanon County is a particularly acute issue.** Children are 71% more likely to experience food insecurity than adults in Lebanon County, with a food insecurity rate of 14.4% compared to 8.4% for adults. This is one of the largest differentials in Pennsylvania and is driven by elevated child poverty rates (38% on average in the High Food Insecurity areas).

**There are significant disparities in food insecurity rates by race and ethnicity in Lebanon County as Black and Hispanic individuals are more than 2.5 times as likely to be food insecure than non-Hispanic white individuals.** Hispanic individuals are the most likely to face food insecurity in the county, with a food insecurity rate of 23% compared to 7% for white, non-Hispanic individuals. Food insecurity rates among Black individuals are in between, at 18%.

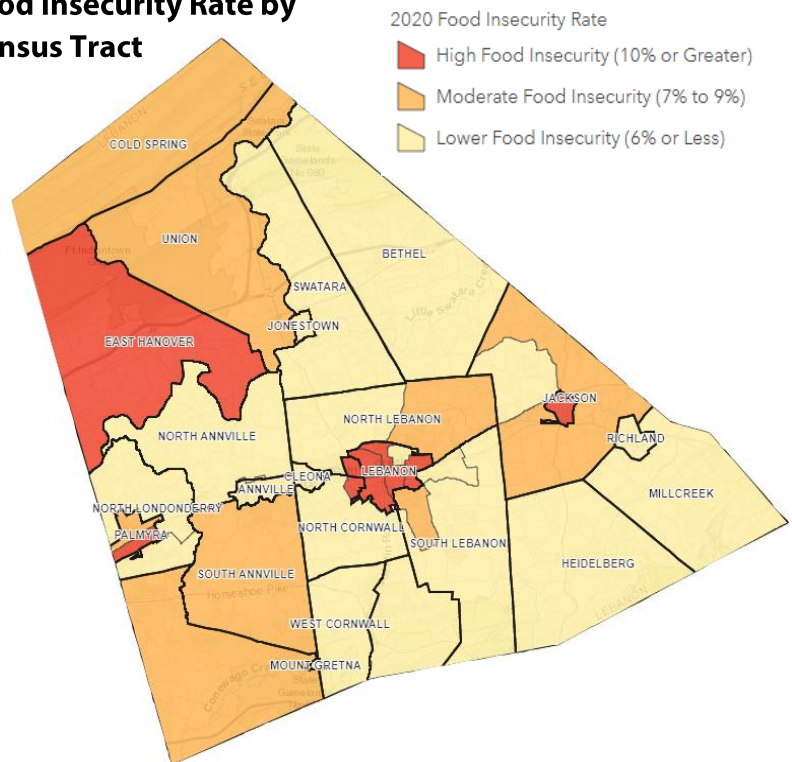
**Very low food security, which is characterized by reduced food intake, is extremely prevalent among food pantry visitors in Lebanon County. A staggering 41% of all food pantry visitors experience reduced food intake on a regular basis.** Reducing very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity, among pantry participants should be the foremost goal of the charitable food system and one of the main barometers with which to measure success.

Very low food security is directly impacted by several main factors, including 1) the neighbor experience and utilization of the charitable food system, 2) SNAP participation and participation in key government programs, and 3) household income and other systemic economic factors.

### ***1. Focusing on the Improving the Neighbor Experience, Building on Best Practices, and Increasing Capacity Investments within the Charitable Food System in Lebanon County***

**The charitable food system reduces very low food security. Rates of very low food security in Lebanon County fall when pantry visitors report utilizing the charitable food system more frequently,** holding key factors such as income and SNAP participation constant. Utilization of the charitable food system is impacted by pantry policies, pantry capacity, and the neighbor experience when visiting food pantries. Each of these factors impacts people's willingness and ability to use the charitable food system.

**Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract**



**Improving the Neighbor Experience: A sizable percentage of neighbors (as high as 10% at certain pantries and 6% on average) report negative experiences with the charitable food system and can recount specific negative experiences. Focusing on the neighbor experience is not tangential to traditional charitable food system work. It is essential in ensuring that neighbors do not go hungry.**

The frequency with which people are willing to utilize the charitable food system is directly impacted by the neighbor experience at food pantries, as interviewees and focus group participants reported not visiting pantries for long periods of time after particularly negative experiences with volunteers and staff.

Improving the neighbor experience at food pantries will require a multi-faceted approach. The food pantry experience is impacted by both the built pantry environment and the individuals staffing the pantries.

- 1. The charitable food system should develop and implement pantry volunteer and staff trainings to set expectations of behavior and treatment and to empower pantry workers with trauma-informed care practices that equip them to treat all neighbors with dignity and respect.** Pantry coordinators should also assess volunteer suitability for neighbor-facing roles and re-assign them as appropriate.
- 2. Extended wait times and long lines are also a neighbor experience issue across food pantries in Lebanon County. The wait time and line experience are often worsened by being outside, even in inclement weather.** Pantries should work to reduce lines by ensuring that the quality and quantity of food offerings are similar from the start to end of a distribution and by testing appointment methods while retaining flexibility for pantry visitors. Pantries should work in the immediate term to move lines inside, as neighbors reported that inclement weather can be dangerous for their health and prevent them from visiting a pantry even when they need help.
- 3. Hispanic and Asian households are the least likely to report finding foods they desire “often or always” at food pantries.** Pantries should solicit food preference feedback from neighbors and the larger charitable food system should support efforts to provide requested foods more regularly.
- 4. One third of individuals who screened as food insecure in non-food pantry surveys reported not knowing where to find a food pantry.** This is a clear opportunity to increase awareness of pantry offerings in public places such as libraries, government offices, and other key locations.

**Building on Best Practices: Pantry policies in Lebanon County are generally in line with best practices across the broader charitable food network; many pantries offer client choice models, provide evening and/or weekend access, and allow households to visit regardless of income.** Furthermore, pantries in Lebanon County allow visitors to visit twice per month or more, which increases the accessibility of charitable food and allowed CPFBR researchers to determine the marginal impact of additional food pantry visits on very low food security status. While these procedures and policies are a significant strength of the Lebanon County charitable food system overall, there is still room for improvement in areas like distribution model and weekend hours access at specific pantries.

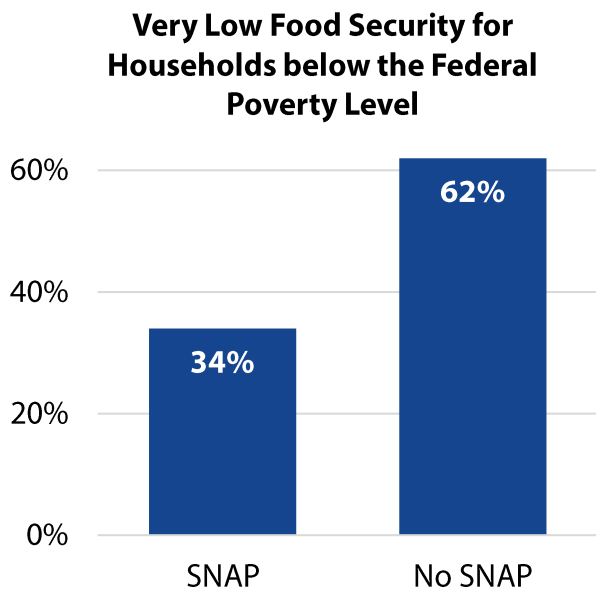
**Capacity Investments: Lebanon County has relatively few food pantries available per food insecure individual.** Pantries report difficulty sourcing adequate amounts of quality and diverse food to meet high levels of demand, difficulty with volunteer capacity, and overall sufficient resources to meet the high level of need. The relatively low number of pantries available means stakeholders should invest further in existing pantries and consider other ways to increase access, such as additional pantry locations, mobile locations, or pop-up distributions, among other strategies.

## 2. SNAP Participation and Utilization of Key Government Programs

The charitable food system and SNAP are inextricably linked, as a 41% drop in SNAP benefits in the first half of 2023 corresponded directly with a 39% increase in visits to food pantries in the county.

SNAP participation cuts very low food security rates by nearly half (45%) among food pantry visitors in Lebanon County when holding incomes below the poverty level and pantry visit frequency constant.

**SNAP participation is just 45% among food pantry visitor households and is middling across the entire county**, leaving significant room for improvement. Increased outreach to drive additional SNAP participation will likely reduce very low food security further among both food pantry visitors and food insecure households who do not utilize the charitable food system.



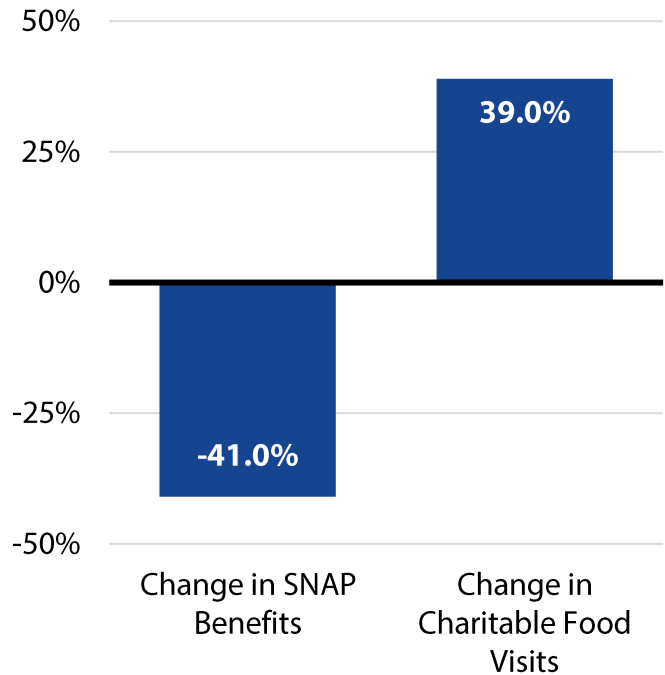
County stakeholders should establish strong relationships with food pantries, healthcare organizations, the county assistance office, and other social services providers to provide clear directions and SNAP application assistance. There is a reported need to make SNAP eligibility requirements less confusing and daunting as well as to ease application burdens.

Other key government nutrition programs such as WIC and school breakfast and lunch programs are also underutilized. Testing and implementing innovative methods to expand outreach and participation would have a significant impact on very low food security across the county, especially among children, who are the most likely to experience food insecurity in Lebanon County.

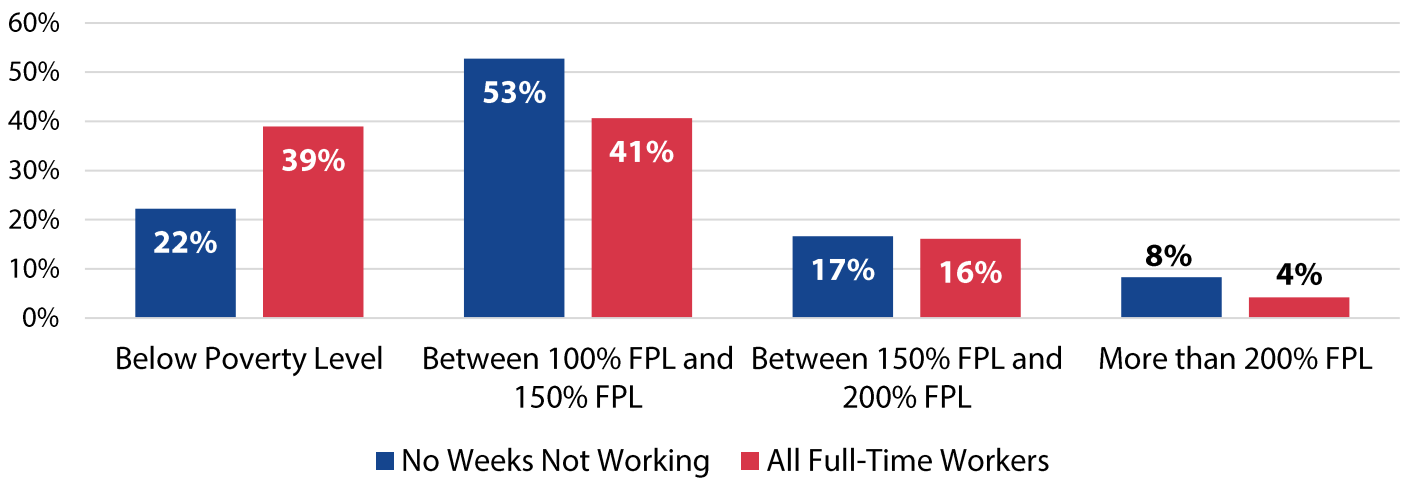
## 3. Household income and systemic economic factors such as financial exclusion, housing burdens, low wages, and transportation impact very low food security significantly.

**Income is one of the most important factors that impact a household's food security status, but 40% of households who work full time earn less than the federal poverty level.** Irregular and inconsistent hours have a major impact on total monthly earnings and corresponding food security status, as households who report "no weeks not working" in the last year have poverty rates close to half of households with less reliable work arrangements. Stakeholders should advocate for family-sustaining wages and for increased consistency in working schedules.

**Percent Change in SNAP Benefits and Charitable Food Visits, Feb - Jun 2023**

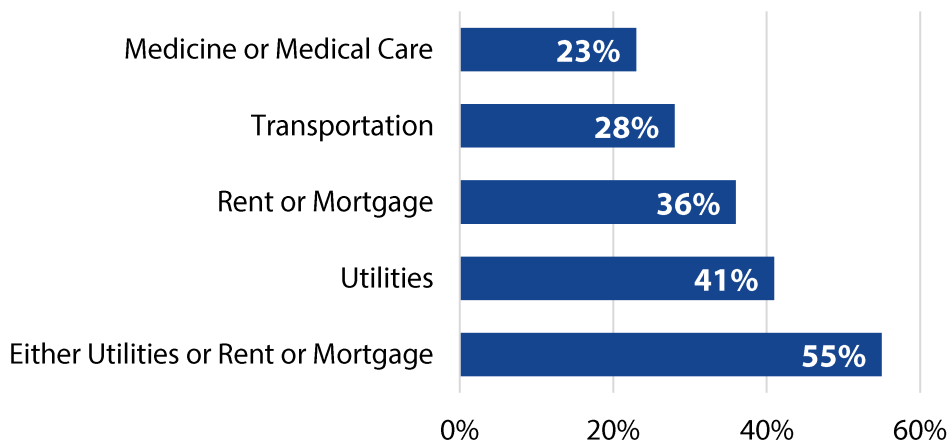


### Full-Time Workers by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level



### Over half of pantry visitor households report choosing between food and utilities or rent/mortgage,

#### Reported Economic Tradeoffs with Food



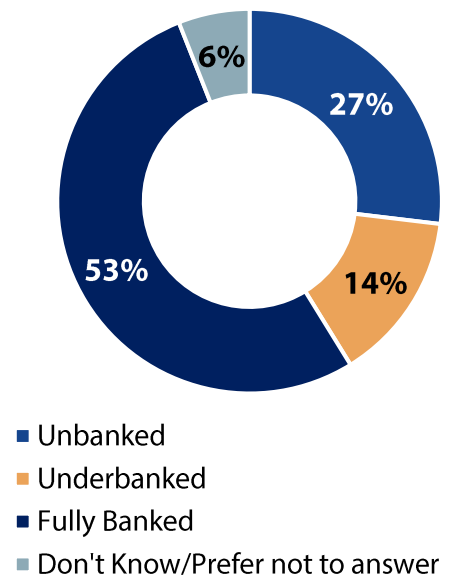
which were the most highly reported economic tradeoffs. A total of 8% of households have been forced to move in the last year, and 20% are worried about being forced to move in the next year. The charitable food system should provide foods suitable to marginally housed individuals, as well as continue and expand utility and housing assistance programs where possible.

**Over half of pantry visitors do not drive to their food pantry, and a fifth of households report difficulty getting to a pantry due to transportation issues.** These neighbors likely also face compounding issues related to transportation in other areas of their lives. Pantries could work to address transportation barriers by experimenting with delivery models or opening mobile distributions.

**Nearly a quarter of pantry visitor households do not have a high school diploma.** Survey results indicate that neighbors are interested in continuing educational opportunities; pantries should consider partnering with community organizations that offer resources like GED courses or career development training.

**Over 40% of pantry visitor households are unbanked (27%) or underbanked (14%),** which reduces the economic mobility pathways available to food insecure households in Lebanon County. Food pantries have an opportunity to partner with financial institutions to increase access to checking and savings accounts, especially around “bankable” moments such as tax time.

### Banking Access among Pantry Visitor Households



## Methods

This final report represents the culmination of a multi-faceted approach to data collection and analysis, with an emphasis on listening to Lebanon County residents who visit food pantries and gaining an understanding of their experiences. The report combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to triangulate findings and support recommendations. 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

In the first phase of the project, the secondary analysis utilized data from a variety of different sources including the American Community Survey 2016-2020 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.

### Neighbor Surveys

In March and April 2023, CPFEB researchers conducted surveys at four geographically and demographically representative food pantries across Lebanon County, with a final pantry surveyed in August 2023. A total of 436 surveys were completed across the five total pantry locations. Food pantry visitors could take the survey at the pantry on a CPFEB-provided device, have the survey read to them by a CPFEB 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 were provided to each participant. Survey results were cleaned for potential duplicate 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.

### Neighbor Focus Groups

Four in-person focus groups were held across Lebanon County. A total of 20 pantry visitors participated across the four focus group locations. Focus groups brought neighbors together to discuss their use of the pantry, gain additional perspective on the needs of pantry visitors, and represent their concerns and ideas about the role of pantries in their communities. PR Works, Inc. was contracted by CPFEB to recruit, facilitate, and record the meetings, and collaborated with the Policy Research team to develop the discussion guide. All participants were compensated for their participation.

## Non-Food Pantry Neighbor Surveys

Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at non-food pantry locations to determine why some individuals who may be food insecure do not currently utilize a food pantry. The surveys were anonymous and included four questions, including two food security screening questions used in healthcare settings. 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 268 total participants at four locations.

## 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 Lebanon County. The surveys asked questions regarding distribution type and frequency, operating hours, policies for food pantry visitors, other services offered, and pantry capacity.

## Partner Interviews

CPFEB Researchers conducted one-on-one partner interviews with five CPFEB agency partners in Lebanon to discuss strengths and challenges at the pantry level. Discussion topics include pantry and community strengths, sourcing and logistics, challenges related to distribution, and opportunities for advocacy.

## Partner Data Sharing and Service Insights

To develop the census tract level food pantry access gap map, this report utilized data from Service Insights on MealConnect, an electronic neighbor intake tool developed by Feeding America, from the three participating pantries in Lebanon County. In addition, one large pantry with independent electronic tracking systems shared anonymized ZIP Code level data. This was not incorporated into the official census tract level analysis, but it helped to generally determine that utilization gaps around the Myerstown area are not highly significant. Altogether, 60% of the CPFEB partner food pantries in Lebanon County are included in the data. These partners are among the largest pantries in the county and comprise a sizable majority of the food pantries who report collecting electronic data. Additional information about the methodology used in the gap analysis is in the technical appendix.



**436 Household-Level Surveys across 5 Pantries**



**Food Pantry and Service Provider Interviews**



**4 Neighbor Focus Groups**



**Food Pantry Coordinator Surveys**



**Extended One-on-one Neighbor Interviews**



**4 Pantries with Census Tract Level Anonymized Data Sharing**



**Secondary Data Collection and Interim Report Analyzing Quantitative Data from many sources**

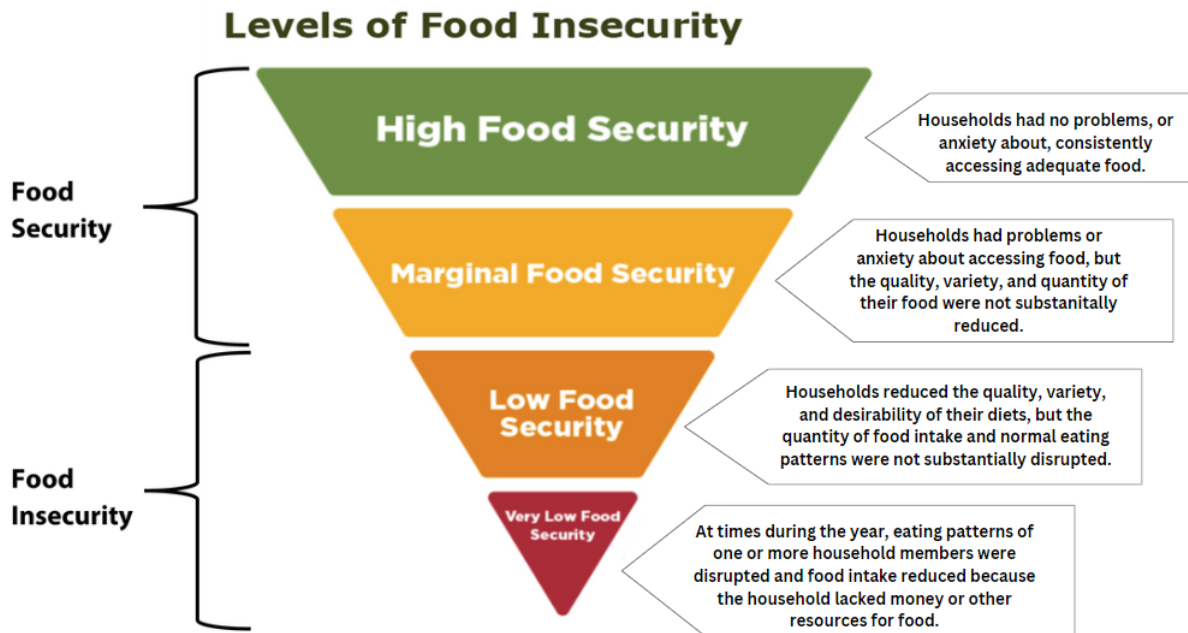


## Section 1: Food Insecurity Analysis

### Food Insecurity: Low Food Security and Very Low Food Security

Food insecurity is defined by lack of access or uncertainty of access to the food needed for an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup> Food security on the other hand requires, at a minimum, the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and the assured ability to acquire foods in socially acceptable ways.

As defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), food security is divided 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.<sup>2</sup>



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.

Traditional food banking and food pantry work's main mission 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. This means that, 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 Lebanon County should focus first and foremost on reducing very low food security, the most severe form of food insecurity.

This report discusses both very low food security, which refers to the individual experience of not having enough to eat, and High Food Insecurity areas, which refers to areas of the county where food insecurity (both very low and low food security) is experienced at greater rates than other areas. These terms are not interchangeable; one indicates an individual person's experience of reduced food intake and the other indicates the collective amount of food insecurity in a certain area being higher than in other areas.

## Food Insecurity in Lebanon County

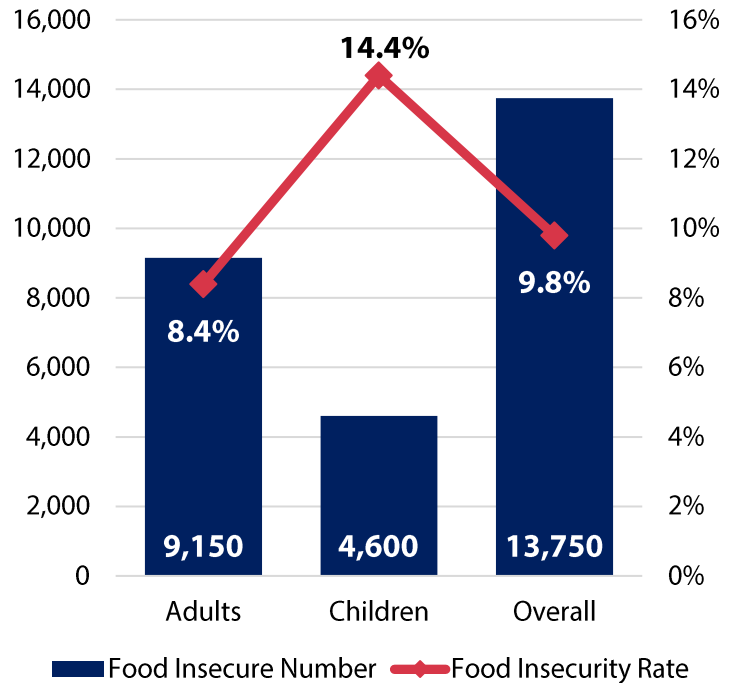
Lebanon County has an overall food insecurity rate of 9.8%, meaning that 13,750 individuals in Lebanon County face food insecurity, according to Feeding America Map the Meal Gap 2022 estimates.<sup>3</sup>

However, the overall food insecurity rate hides major disparities in the experience of food insecurity across age groups, race/ethnicity, and geography in Lebanon County.

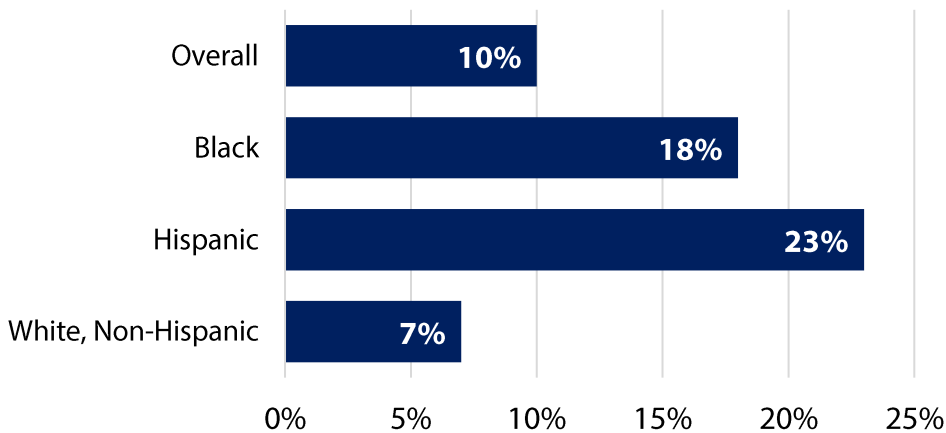
Food insecurity rates by age group have stark differences in Lebanon County. Children in Lebanon County are 71% more likely to be food insecure than adults, with a food insecurity rate of 14.4%, compared to just 8.4% for adults. This is the 14<sup>th</sup> highest age disparity by county in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, indicating that child food insecurity is a unique challenge in Lebanon County.

Food insecurity rates are sharply disparate by race and ethnicity in Lebanon County. Hispanic individuals in Lebanon County are more than three times as likely to be food insecure as non-Hispanic white individuals, with a food insecurity rate of 23% compared to just 7% among non-Hispanic white individuals.

### 2020 Food Insecurity by Age Group



### Food Insecurity Rates by Race/Ethnicity

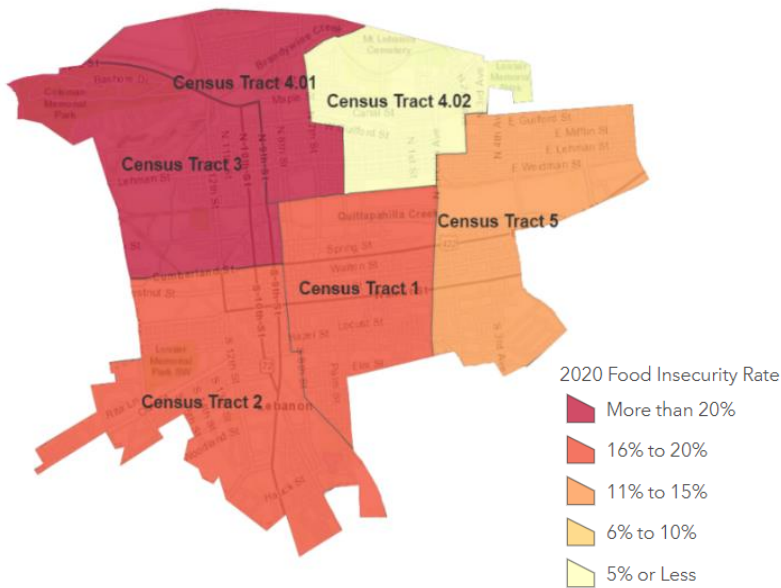


Of the 52 Pennsylvania counties with food insecurity data broken out by ethnicity, Lebanon has the 12<sup>th</sup> highest food insecurity rate among Hispanic individuals, indicating that the disparities in food insecurity by race/ethnicity are particularly acute in Lebanon County. Furthermore, Black individuals in Lebanon County have a food insecurity rate of 18%, more than twice that of non-Hispanic white individuals.





## Lebanon City: Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract



Lebanon City census tracts have the highest food insecurity rates in the county. As shown in the map at left, all Lebanon City census tracts except Census Tract 4.02 in northeast Lebanon City have food insecurity rates of at least 14.0%.

Above the generally elevated food insecurity rate in Lebanon City, there are still significant food insecurity disparities between different parts of Lebanon City. Census Tracts 3 and 4.01 in the northwestern portion of the city have food insecurity rates of 22% and 25%, respectively, while census tracts 1 and 2 in the southwestern portion of the city have rates of 18% and 16%, respectively.

The map below shows the total number of

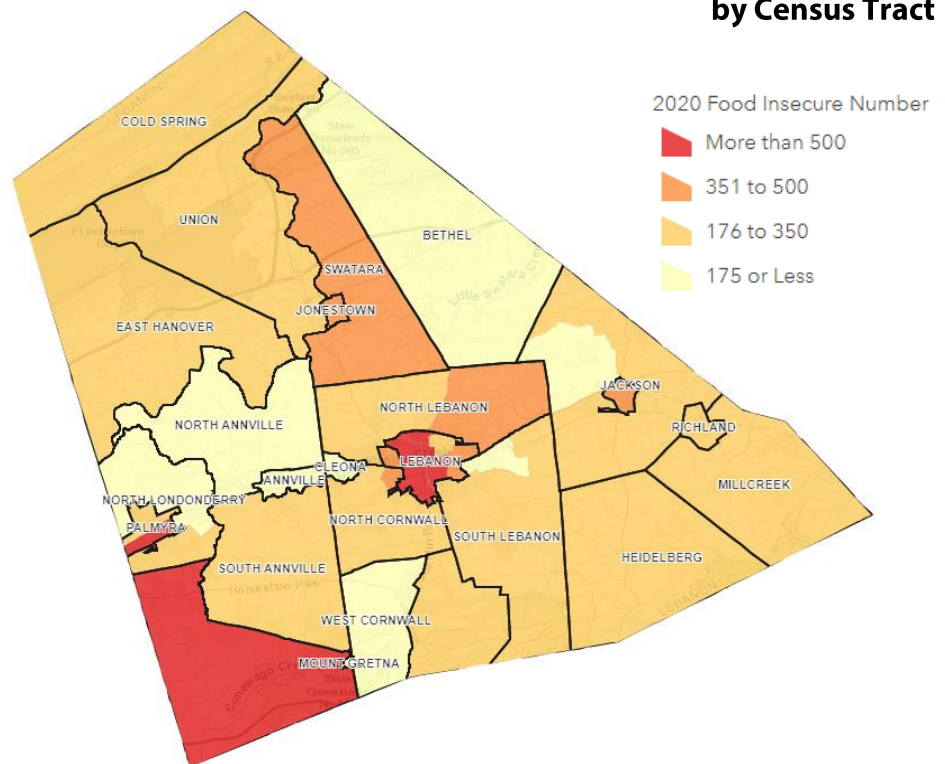
food insecure individuals by census tract in Lebanon County. Lebanon City still has the highest concentration of food insecurity, with over 4,300 food insecure individuals. A staggering 39% of food insecure individuals in Lebanon County live in the city, despite its having just 18% of the total county population.

Additionally, the southern portion of Palmyra and South Londonderry Township each have more than 500 food insecure individuals. Palmyra (both census tracts combined) has 840 total food insecure individuals, and nearby South Londonderry Township has 690 food insecure individuals.

Other relatively high populations of food insecure individuals are concentrated in Jonestown and Swatara Township, Myerstown, North Lebanon, and West Lebanon Township.

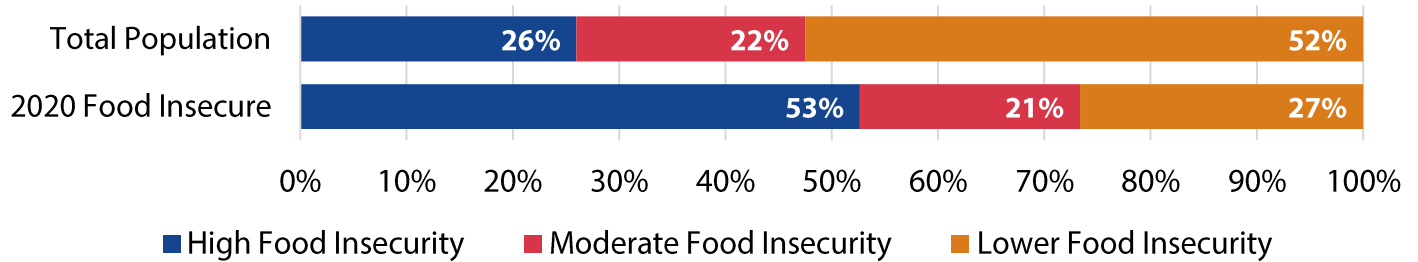
Analyzing food insecurity rates by census tract and grouping them into these typologies provide actionable insights for the charitable food network regarding the concentration of food insecurity across the county. The results of this analysis indicate that focusing efforts in the specific areas and census tracts identified above would have an outsized impact on reducing food insecurity in Lebanon County.

## Number of Food Insecure Individuals by Census Tract



In fact, the seven High Food Insecurity census tracts are home to just 26% of the county population, but as shown in the graph below, they account for more than half (53%) of all food insecure individuals. With that said, it remains critical to continue to invest in Moderate and Lower Food Insecurity areas, as they still contain 21% and 27% of all food insecure people in Lebanon County, respectively.

**Food Insecure Number and Population by Food Insecurity Category**



Poverty Rates and Food Insecurity Disparities by Census Tract in Lebanon County

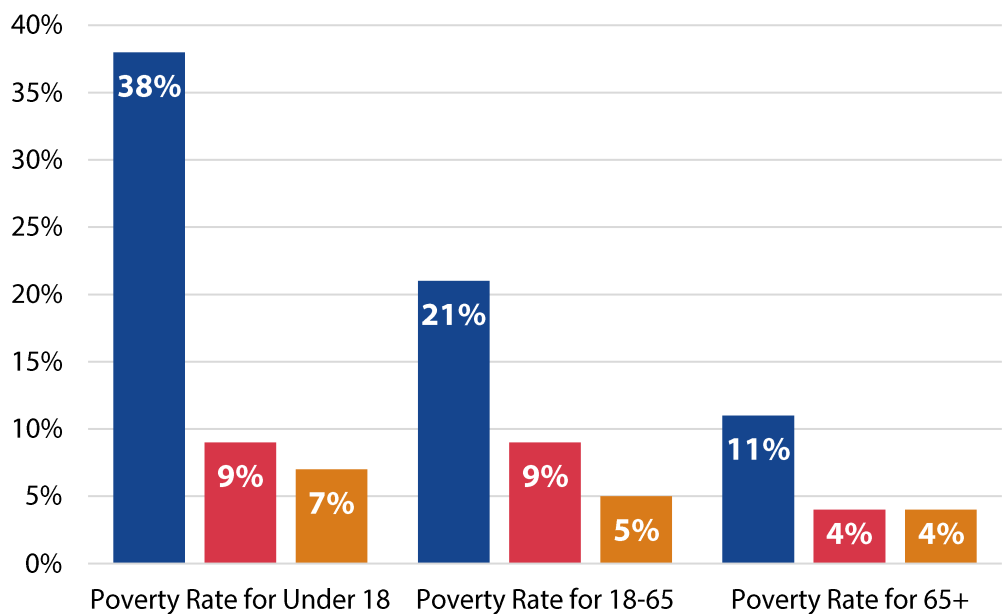
**In Lebanon County, the largest differentiator between High Food Insecurity and Moderate and Lower Food Insecurity tracts is the staggering difference in poverty by age, especially for children under 18.**

Underlying poverty rates by age group vary dramatically by food insecurity typology, even though age distributions in all census tracts in Lebanon County are very similar. These differences in poverty rate are sharpest for children, who are by far the most likely to be in poverty of any age group in the county.

Child poverty rates are an astonishing 39% in High Food Insecurity census tracts, more than four times that of the 9% and 7% rates found in Moderate and Lower Food Insecurity areas.

There are significant differences in poverty rates for ages 18-65 and 65+ by census tract food insecurity typology, as adults and seniors who live in High Food Insecurity census tracts are at least twice as likely to be in poverty than people in their age group who reside in Moderate or Low Food Insecurity tracts.

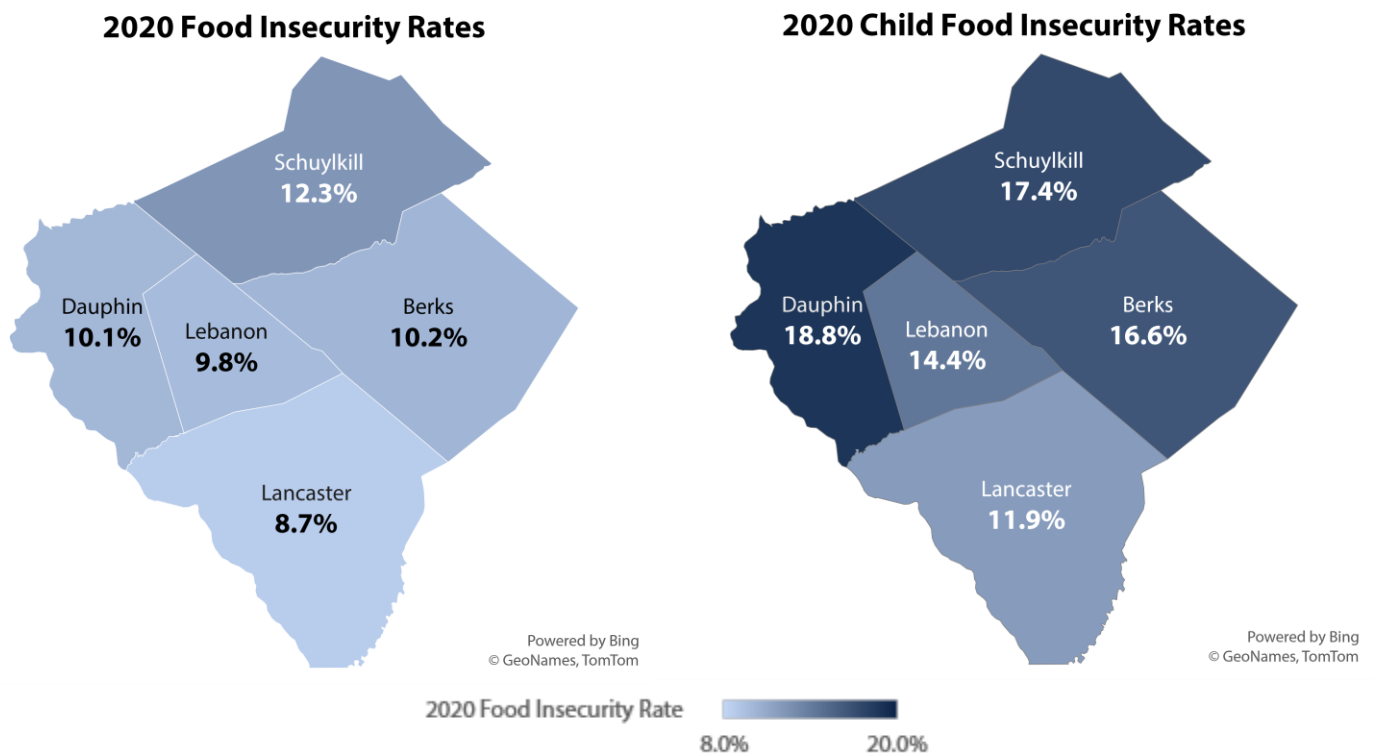
**Poverty Rate by Age Group in Lebanon for Census Tract Food Insecurity Typologies**



These differences for adults and seniors are not nearly as striking or severe in magnitude as those for children under 18. Therefore, in Lebanon County it is incredibly important to ensure that families with children have access to sufficient food, especially in High Food Insecurity areas.

## Food Insecurity in Lebanon County in Regional Context

Lebanon County's food insecurity rate is about a percentage point lower than that of the state of Pennsylvania as a whole, at 9.8% compared to 10.7%, and Lebanon ranks as the 51<sup>st</sup> lowest in the state (out of 67 total counties) in overall food insecurity rates. As discussed above, these county-level rates mask extreme disparities and inequality seen at the sub-county level across Lebanon County.



As seen in the maps above, Lebanon County has an overall food insecurity rate similar to those of its neighbors and a child food insecurity rate slightly lower than Dauphin, Schuylkill, and Berks counties. Each of these three neighbors are in the top half of the state in terms of child food insecurity rates, while Lebanon has just the 46<sup>th</sup> highest child food insecurity rate out of 67 counties. However, Lebanon County's disparity between adult and child food insecurity rates remains among the highest in the state.

## National Food Insecurity Disparities by Household Type

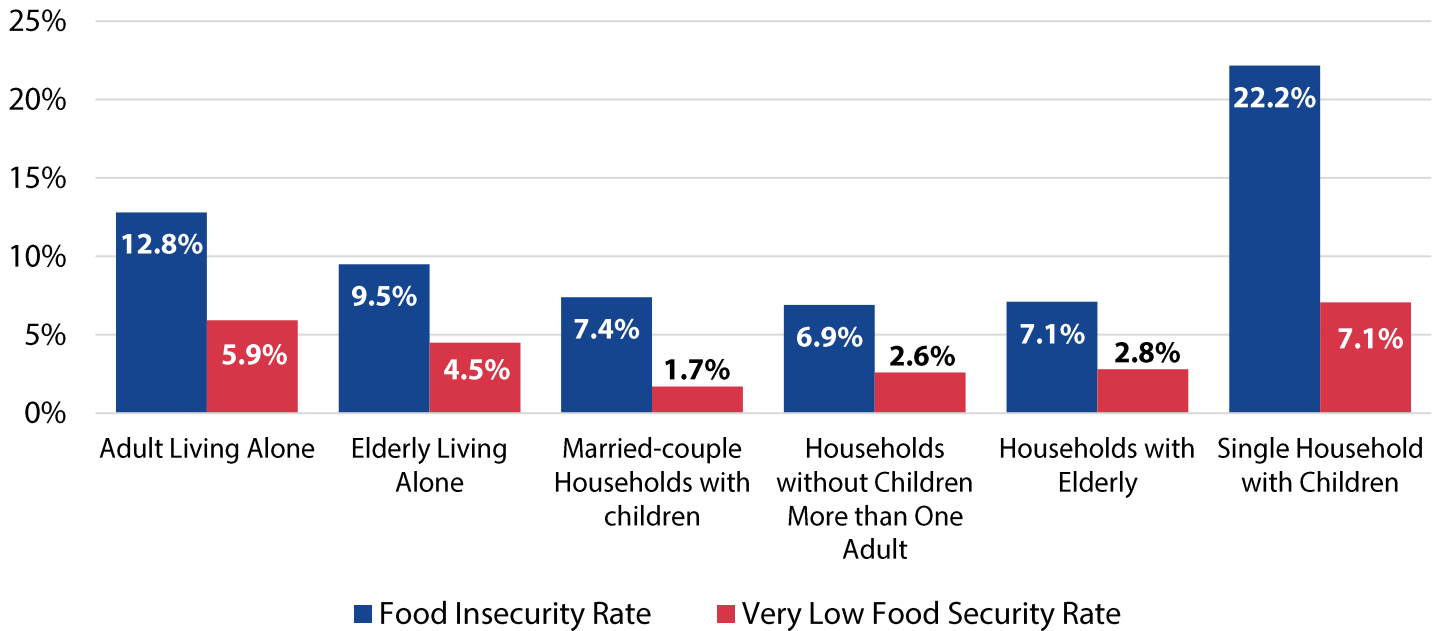
While more specific food insecurity data is currently not available at the local level, USDA annual reports provide breakdowns on the prevalence of food insecurity by household type at the national level.

- Food insecurity rates are highest for single female-headed households with children at 24.3%.
- Single male-headed households with children had lower, but still elevated food insecurity rates of 16.2%.
  - Notably, food insecurity rates among single households with children were two to three percentage points lower in 2021 than 2020, due to pandemic-era policies that targeted and reduced poverty among households with children, like the expanded child tax credit.
- Households with children under 6 years old had a food insecurity rate higher than households with children overall at 12.9%, compared to 12.5% for households with children ages 6 to 17.
- Married-couple families with children had a food insecurity rate of 7.4%.

**Households without children are much less likely to be food insecure than households with children, with food insecurity rates of 9.4%.**

- Food insecurity rates are lower for households with more than one adult (6.9%) than for households with men or women living alone (12.3% and 13.2%, respectively).
- Multi-adult households with elderly members have the lowest food insecurity rates of any household type examined by the USDA, at 7.1%, but elderly people living alone have slightly higher rates at 9.5%.

**National Food Insecurity Rate by Household Type**



**The Extent of Food Insecurity among Food Pantry Visitors in Lebanon County**

Compared to the general population in Lebanon County, food pantry visitors are much more likely to be food insecure. People visit food pantries when they need assistance purchasing sufficient food, so nearly all food pantry visitors experience at least marginal food security.

However, high prevalence of low and very low food security among pantry visitors is not a given. Very low food security is characterized by a regular reduction of food intake resulting from lack of money for food, but the charitable food system can and does help households avoid reducing their food intake through its core food banking and food pantry work. This means that the reduction of very low food security can be considered a main measure of success for the charitable food system, because very low food security is the best measurable approximation of hunger, and the charitable food system aims to alleviate hunger in the communities it serves.

To that end, this report provides a baseline understanding of the extent of very low food security and low food security among food pantry visitors in Lebanon County to allow the charitable food system to measure progress over time.



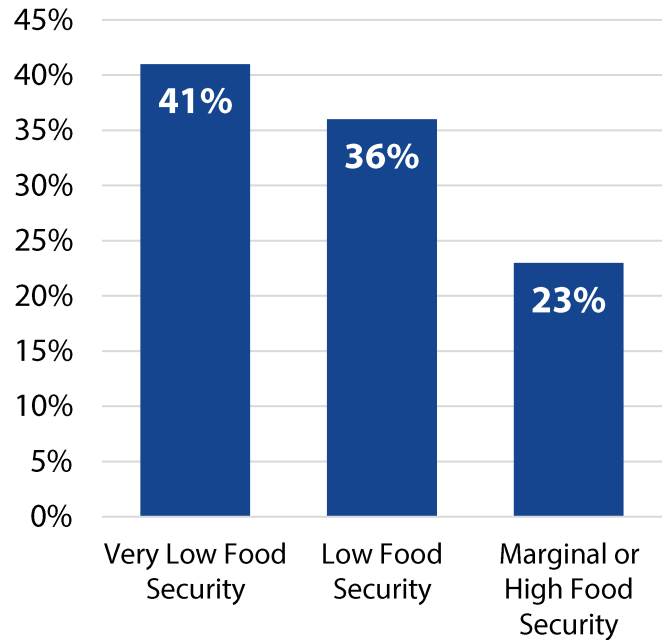
## The Severity of Food Insecurity Among Lebanon County Pantry Visitors

To measure food insecurity, this study utilized a six-question food security module from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). This module accurately measures very low and low food security, differentiating between the two types of food insecurity by the number of questions answered affirmatively. The six questions include questions on the adequacy of the amount of food, the variety of food, and the frequency with which people do not eat because there is not enough money for food.

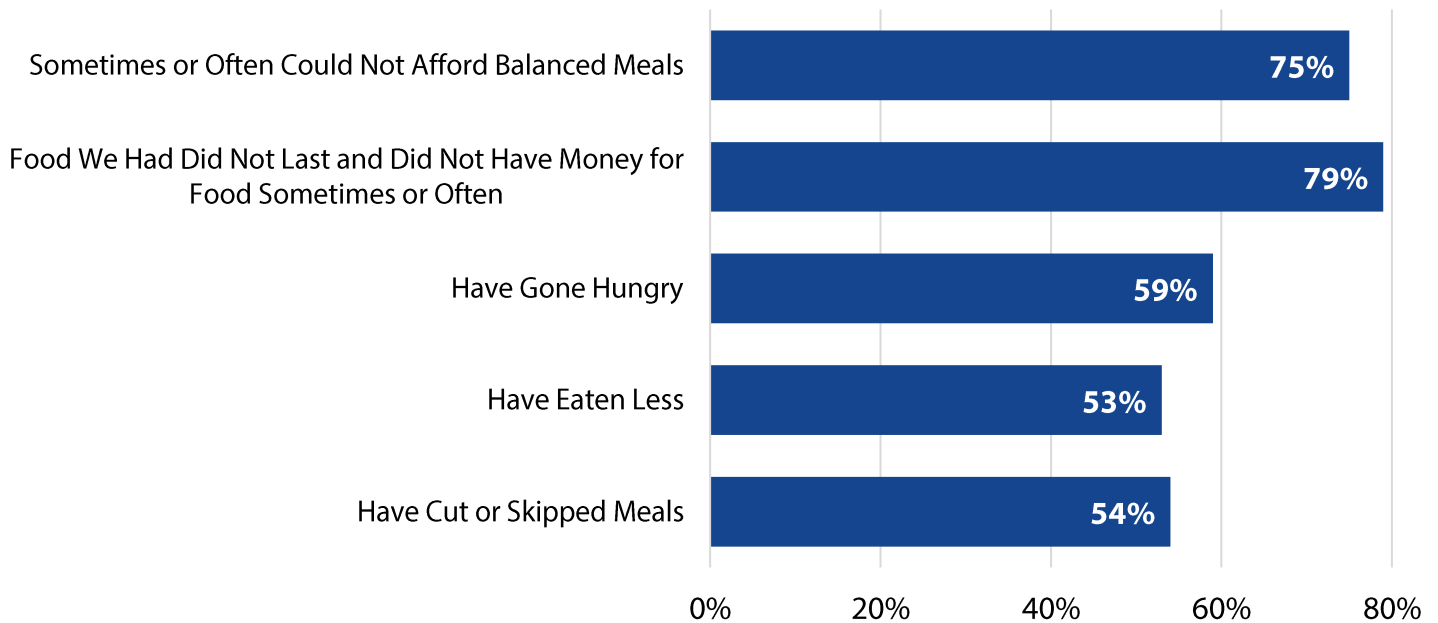
Overall, just over 40% of food pantry visitors experienced very low food security, indicating that they cut back on the quantity of food they consumed and did not eat enough on a regular basis. Both the average and median values for very low food security was both 41%, providing increased confidence in the consistency in the survey's estimate of very low food security. An additional 36% of food pantry visitors experienced low food security, meaning that a combined 77% of food pantry visitors in Lebanon County face USDA-defined food insecurity. The high level of experienced food insecurity may also be an indication that people begin to utilize the charitable food system when they are consistently reducing food intake already.

Answers for the questions that underlie the USDA measure of food security are provided in the figure below. Over three-quarters of respondents sometimes or often could not afford balanced meals (75%) or ran out of food and did not have money for food sometimes or often (79%).

### Household Food Security Status among Food Pantry Visitors

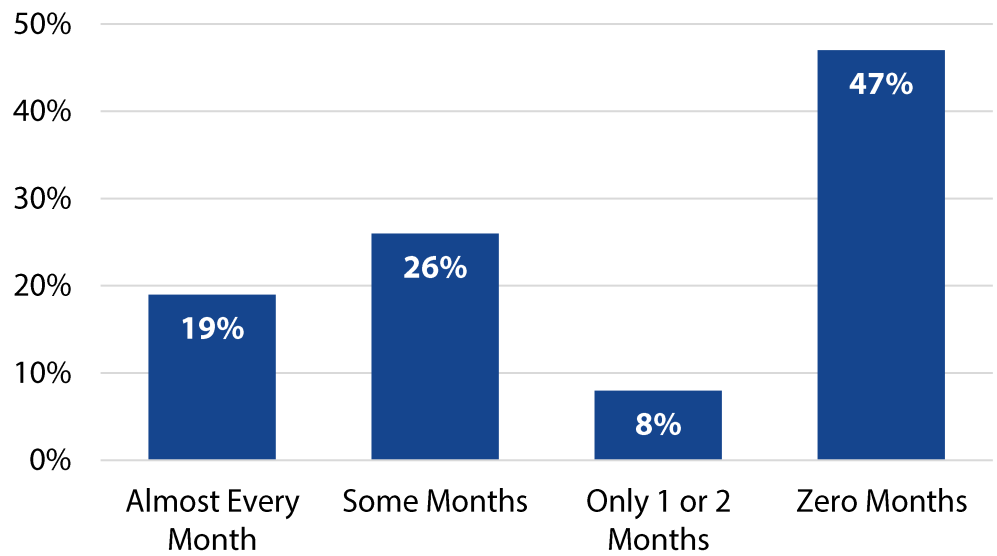


### Food Security Measure Underlying Questions: Percent of Respondents Responding Affirmatively



Additionally, 59% of respondents reported having gone hungry in the last twelve months, while just over half of respondents have eaten less (53%) or have cut or skipped meals (54%) because there was not enough money for food. Of the 53% of respondents who reported cutting or skipping meals, 19% reported doing so every single month, while 26% reported doing so some months, but not every month. The 19% of respondents who cut or skip meals almost every month because there was not enough money for food represent those who are facing the most severe form of very low food security.

**Frequency of Cut or Skipped Meals among Pantry Visitors**

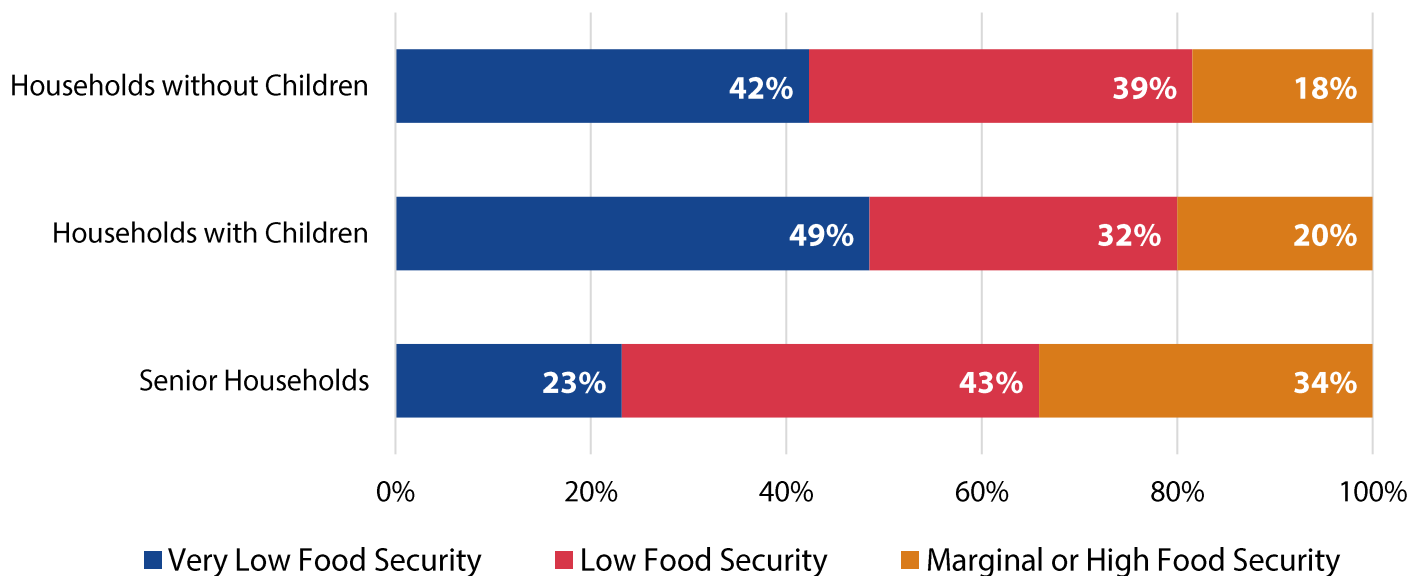


The question on whether households are forced to cut or skip meals and the frequency with which they do so is the best single-question proxy for very low food security among the six underlying questions. Fully 94% of people who experience very low food security reported cutting or skipping meals either almost every month or some months and not every month. Going forward, this question could be the best way to consistently measure experiences of very low food security at food pantries over time.

**Food Insecurity By Household Type Among Lebanon County Pantry Visitors**

Food security status varied dramatically by household type among pantry visitor households. Due to limited sample sizes for certain household types such as single households with children and senior two-person households, data was combined for households with multiple adults based on age and presence of children.

**Food Security Status by Household Type**



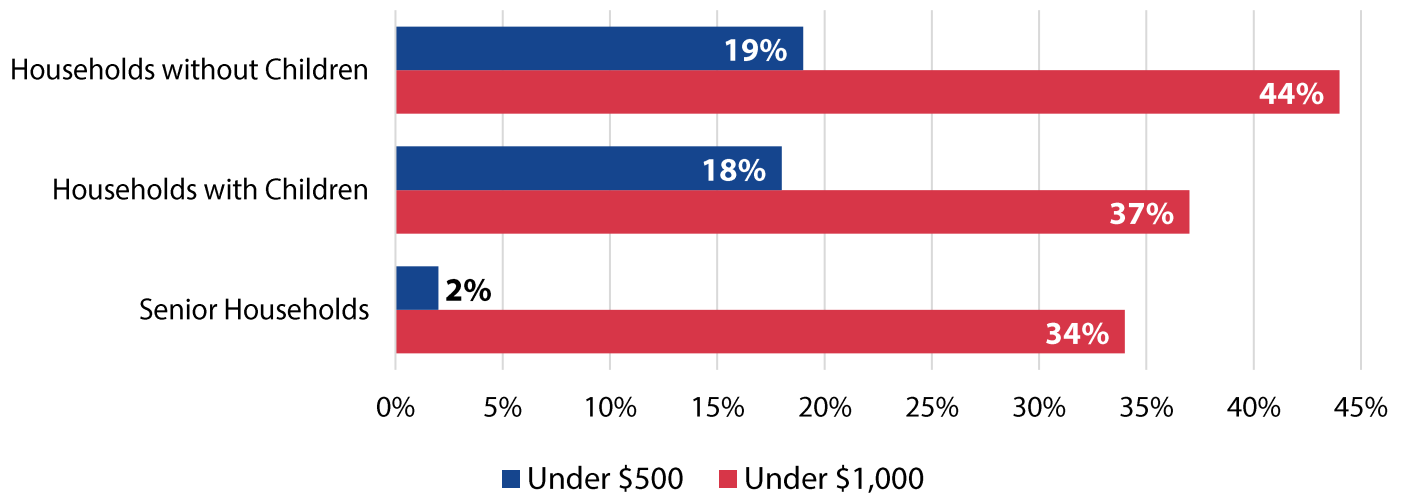
Survey results show that seniors are by far the least likely to experience very low food security among individuals who visit food pantries in Lebanon County, with less than one-quarter of senior households experiencing very low food security. This is half the rate of very low food security of other household types. It is important to note that even a very low food security rate of 23% still represents a significant percentage of seniors who go hungry on a regular basis, but seniors also have the highest percentage of people with marginal or high food security, at nearly 35%.

On the other hand, working-age households with children are the most likely to experience very low food security. Nearly half of all households with children face very low food security, while just over 40% of working-age households without children experience very low food security.

The notable divergence of very low food security rates between senior-only households and households with other age compositions is very likely the result of low but consistent incomes among senior households receiving Social Security, compared to the more volatile incomes of other household types. Further, there are programs that specifically support senior households with additional food assistance, like CSFP senior boxes and affordable housing programs.

Senior households are very unlikely to earn less than \$500 a month, with just 2% of senior households falling into this category compared to 18% and 19% of working-age households with and without children, respectively. In addition, just 34% of seniors earn less than \$1,000 a month compared to 37% and 44% of households with and without children, respectively. Earning less than \$1,000 a month and especially less than \$500 a month puts households at the greatest risk of experiencing very low food security, so the low but steady incomes of senior households appear to keep senior households from experiencing very low food security at similar rates as working households. Fully 49% of senior households earn \$1,000 to \$1,999 a month while working-age households are more likely to have higher or lower incomes.

**Pantry Visitors with Monthly Household Incomes Under \$500 and Under \$1,000 by Household Type**



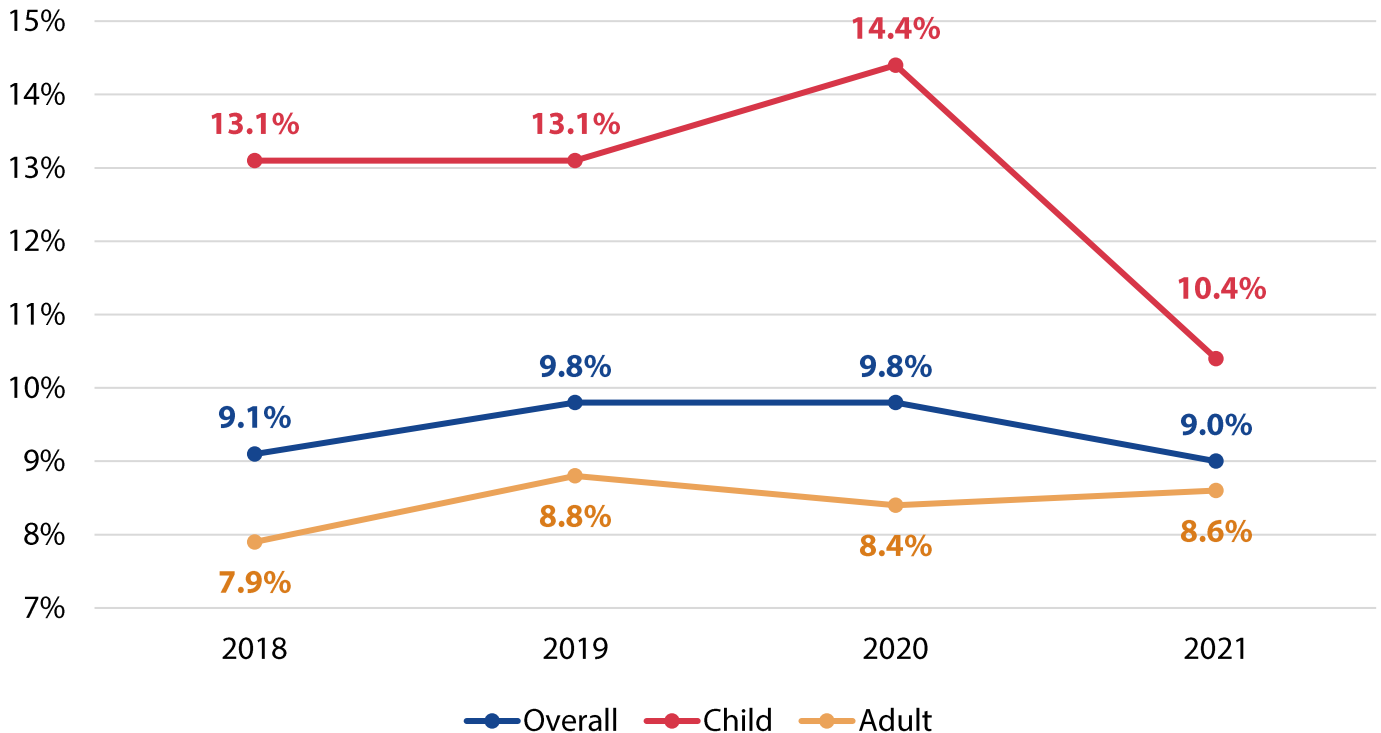
Among pantry visitors, there were only slight differences in very low food security rates by race/ethnicity. This does not mean that households with differing race/ethnicities are equally likely to experience very low food security overall in Lebanon County, but rather that among households who visit food pantries, households are similarly likely to experience very low food security regardless of race/ethnicity.



## Food Insecurity Over Time: The Impact of the Expanded Child Tax Credit

In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity rates stayed relatively consistent, with food insecurity even slightly increasing in 2019 during some of the best economic conditions in recent memory. Throughout these years, child food insecurity remained elevated relative to adult food insecurity, and in 2020, child food insecurity rates were 71% higher than adult food insecurity rates in Lebanon County, one of the sharpest inequalities in food insecurity rates between children and adults of all counties in the state.

**Lebanon County Food Insecurity By Age Group Over Time**



In 2021, the differential was briefly cut by more than half thanks to the implementation of the expanded child tax credit as a part of COVID-19 pandemic response. Child food insecurity rates dropped 27% in just one year from 2020 to 2021, while adult food insecurity rose slightly. This dramatic drop in food insecurity rates was driven by the historic anti-poverty investment of the expanded child tax credit that provided \$250 a month for children ages 6 to 17 and \$300 a month for children under 5 years old, without requiring a minimum income. This major investment in children paid off and drove the largest decrease in poverty and food insecurity for children in the last 25 years, which is the earliest food insecurity data is available.<sup>4,5</sup>

Unfortunately, the current child tax credit is just \$2,000, provided on an annual basis, and excludes the lowest income households, significantly reducing its current impact on food insecurity. The expanded child tax credit in 2021 showed that a major investment in children can very quickly reduce lived food insecurity among children and can push overall food insecurity below its previous floor, something that economic growth and low unemployment have not been able to do alone. The expiration of the expanded child tax credit means that current child food insecurity rates are much more like those seen in 2020 than they are to 2021, as evidenced by the recent increase in child poverty.<sup>6</sup>

## Food Insecurity Main Findings Recommendations

**Section 1 Finding 1: Lebanon County has a food insecurity rate of just under 10%. This is about one percentage point less than Pennsylvania overall, but the countywide rate masks significant inequities within the county, as areas of High Food Insecurity (greater than 10%) are primarily concentrated in Lebanon City and West Lebanon as well as in Palmyra, East Hanover, and Myerstown.**

These census tracts have just 26% of the total Lebanon County population but 53% of all food insecure individuals.

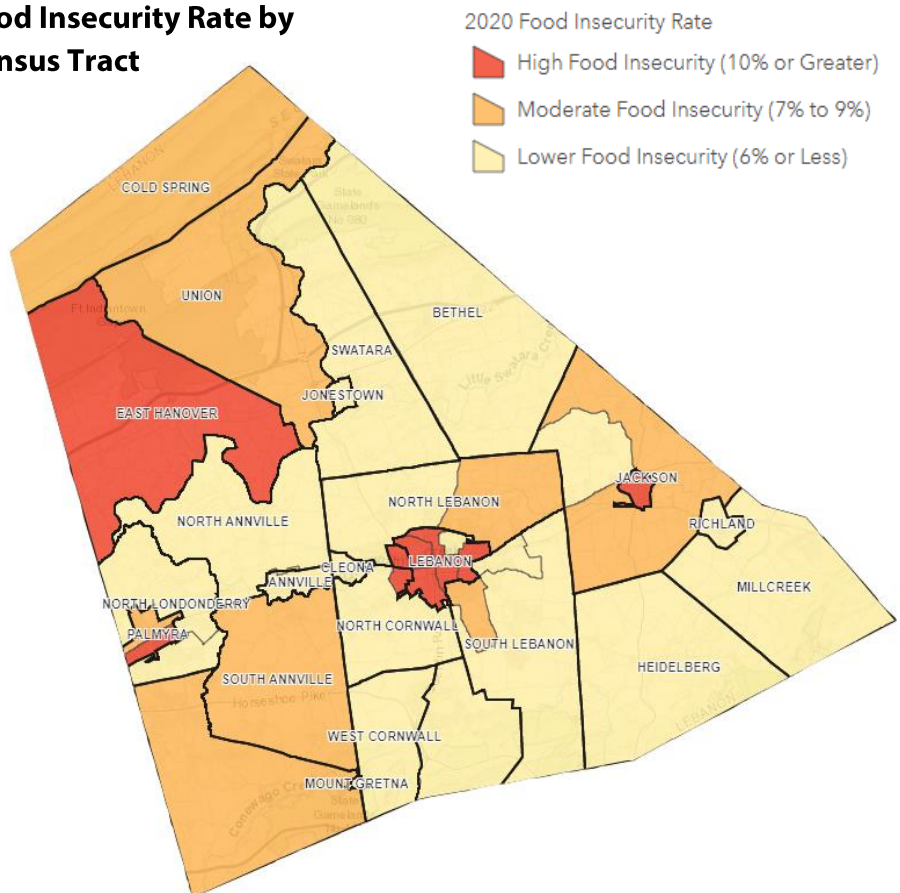
Lebanon City has a high concentration of food insecurity, as four of six neighborhoods have food insecurity rates higher than 16% and the northwest portion of the city has food insecurity rates over 20%. Lebanon City has 18% of the county population but 39% of food insecure individuals.

Notably, South Londonderry Township has Moderate Food Insecurity rates but is home to the most food insecure individuals outside of Palmyra and Lebanon City. Parts of Jonestown, West Lebanon, Myerstown, and North Lebanon also have significant numbers of food insecure individuals.

**Recommendation: Sustained, targeted work to provide services in High Food Insecurity areas are critical to addressing the high level of need in the county. Stakeholders should continue and increase investments in areas of High Food Insecurity.**

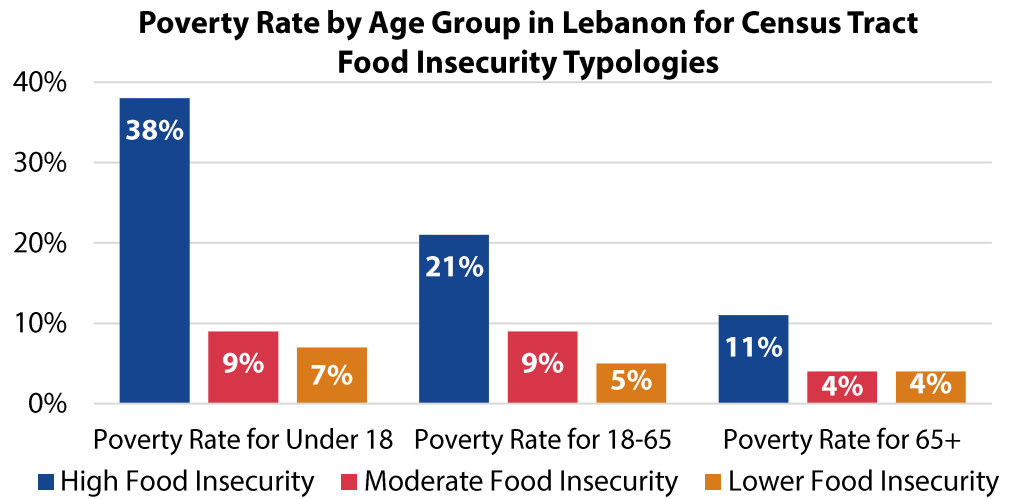
Moderate and Lower Food Insecurity areas should continue to be served, but ensuring High Food Insecurity areas have sufficient resources will make the biggest impact.

**Food Insecurity Rate by Census Tract**



**Section 1 Finding 2: Food insecurity among children is 71% higher than adults; this differential is significantly greater in Lebanon County than most other counties in Pennsylvania. Child food insecurity and child poverty are the most important differentiators between High Food Insecurity areas and other areas in the county.**

While children in all areas of Lebanon County have higher food insecurity and poverty rates than working-age adults and seniors, the issue is especially acute in Lebanon City and West Lebanon. These areas have just 23% of the county’s children, but 51% of children in poverty. Several High Food Insecurity census tracts in Lebanon City have child poverty rates over 40%.

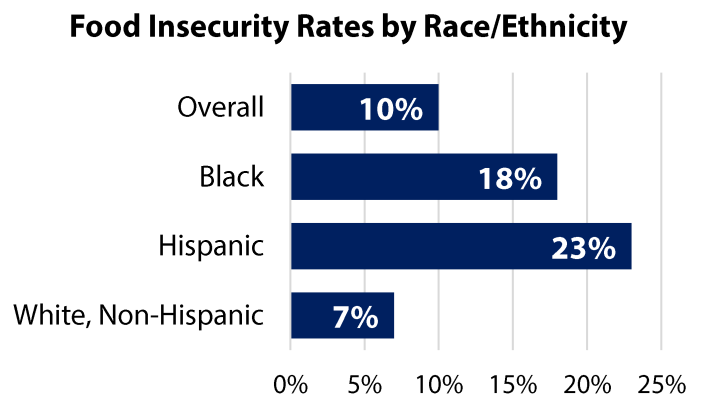


**Recommendation: It is important to invest in programs that support households with children in Lebanon County overall and particularly in Lebanon City. Addressing child poverty and child food insecurity in Lebanon City would have outsized impacts on food insecurity overall, both in the near and long-term.**

Programs that target children should include the whole family where possible, because while children are the most likely to be food insecure, parents are the most likely to go hungry.

**Section 1 Finding 3: Food insecurity among Hispanic individuals is 23%, more than three times the rate of white, non-Hispanic individuals in Lebanon County at just 7%.**

Two of the three majority-Hispanic census tracts in Lebanon County lie in the northwestern portion of Lebanon City and have the highest food insecurity rates in the county, with food insecurity rates over 20%. A portion of the difference in food insecurity rates by ethnicity is likely attributable to population effects because Lebanon County has a high child food insecurity rate, and 23% of Lebanon County residents under 18 are Hispanic, compared to just 12% of Lebanon County adults.



**Recommendation: Given the large differential in food insecurity rates by ethnicity in Lebanon County, culturally relevant and competent services catered to Hispanic households are critical to the charitable food system.**

Pantries in Lebanon City should ensure they have Spanish-speaking staff or volunteers on a consistent basis and partnerships with Hispanic and Latino churches and community organizations could be pivotal. Focusing on reducing child food insecurity could also reduce disparities by ethnicity because the demographic distribution of race/ethnicity is significantly different between children and adults in Lebanon County.

**Section 1 Finding 4: The expanded child tax credit caused child food insecurity rates to drop 27% from 14.4% in 2020 to 10.4% in 2021, their lowest level on record in Lebanon County, demonstrating the impact of strategically targeted government investments.**

**Recommendation: Stakeholders should continue to advocate for the reinstatement of the expanded child tax credit with policymakers as this would have the largest impact on child food insecurity of any potential program or government investment.**

Pantries and other interested stakeholders should take lessons from the simplicity of the program design of the expanded child tax credit and the dignity and autonomy the design promoted. In the charitable food context, this could mean switching from pre-packed distributions to choice models, providing gift cards rather than purchasing foods at retail prices, or other innovations that allow neighbors the freedom to choose the products and services that best meet their needs.

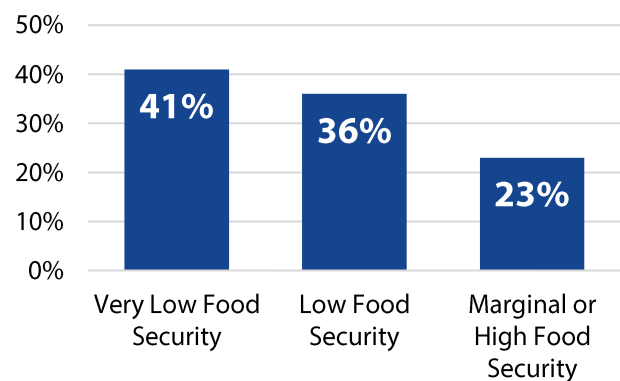
**Section 1 Finding 5: More than 40% of food pantry visitors in Lebanon County experience very low food security, which is characterized by the consistent reduction of quantity of food intake, in addition to a reduction of the quality of food intake.**

Over half of food pantry visitors (54%) report having cut or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food at some point in the last year, with 19% of food pantry visitors reporting that they had to do so almost every month in the last year.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should use the goal of reducing very low food security as its main measure of success and work to implement and promote policies and programs that make progress to this goal.**

These strategies should be holistic and include improving the neighbor experience, providing desired foods, reducing other identified barriers to charitable food access, and working to increase utilization of government programs.

**Household Food Security Status among Food Pantry Visitors**



**Section 1 Finding 6: Very low food insecurity among working-age food pantry visitor households is more than double the very low food security rate among senior households who visit food pantries.**

Working-age households with children face the highest rates of very low food security at 49% compared to 42% of working-age households without children. Just 23% of senior households experience very low food security. These differences are largely driven by the more consistent, though still low, incomes of senior households and government and non-profit programs targeted specifically towards seniors.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system and other stakeholders should continue to invest in senior-specific programs because they are effective at reducing very low food security and should expand programming and offerings to working-age households where possible.**

## Section 2: Access to Charitable Food in Lebanon County

The charitable food system in Lebanon County has several strengths in certain components of access that are not found at the same scale in many other counties in Pennsylvania, but there are also areas in need of improvement, especially around the neighbor experience of utilizing the charitable food system in Lebanon County. Access to the charitable food system is multidimensional and is ultimately determined by both visible geographic components, such as driving or walking distances and times to food pantries, and less tangible components like hours of operation, service territories, frequency of allowable visits, income limits, documentation requirements, foods available, treatment of pantry visitors and pantry distribution models. Each component will be examined in turn throughout this section.

### Strengths of the Charitable Food System

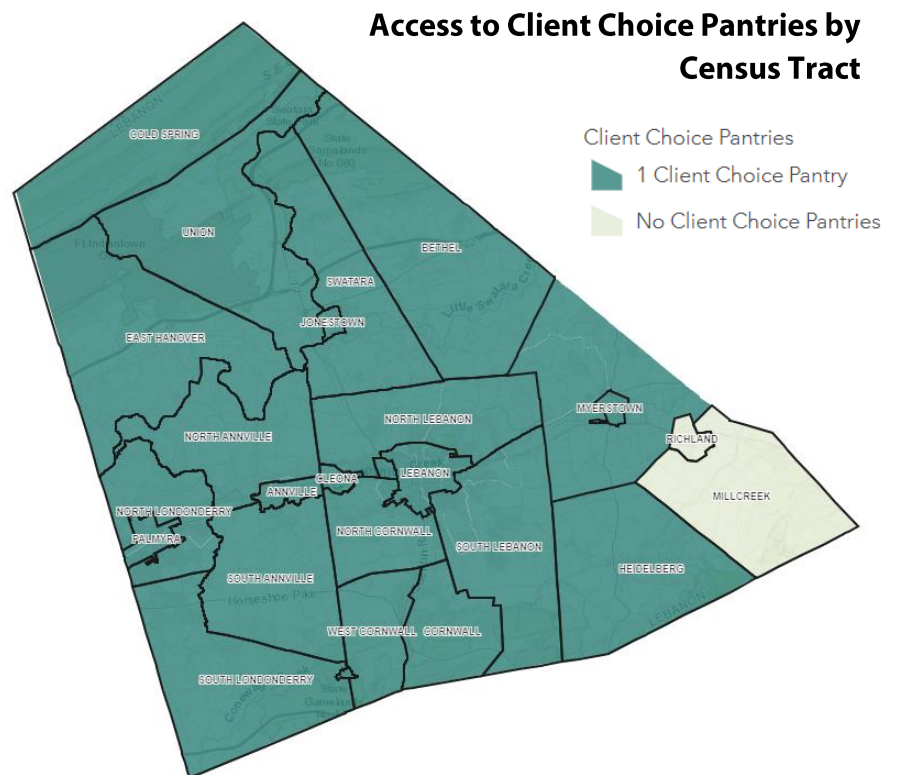
The charitable food system in Lebanon County has many strengths, including the employment of best practices at many pantries across the county. These best practices include the significant use of and neighbor access to client choice pantries in Lebanon County; limited or no restrictions on the frequency of allowable services; varied days and hours of operation including off-hours distributions, consistent policies to serve households over 185% of the federal poverty level; and the presence of a robust food policy council.

### Client Choice Pantry Availability

The first major strength of the Lebanon County charitable food system is the presence of client choice pantries across the county. At least one choice pantry is within a 15-minute drive of the center of population of all but one census tract in the county. By this metric, 98% of all food insecure individuals in Lebanon County can be considered to have access to a client choice pantry in driving distance; the 2% who lack access are the residents of the census tract that includes Richland and Millcreek Township.

A total of 60% of food pantries in Lebanon County currently utilize a client choice model, and these pantries are relatively evenly dispersed across the county, increasing client choice access. Yet, there is still some room for growth in increasing client choice options among food pantries in Lebanon County.

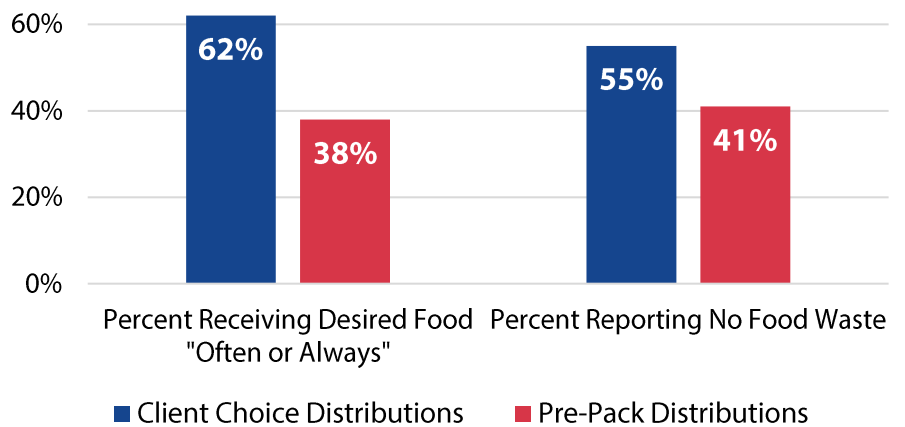
Neighbor survey results show that client choice pantries increase the likelihood that visitors will “often or always” receive foods that they like. In addition to the increased neighbor autonomy choice pantries foster, this model reduces reported food waste. At client choice distributions in Lebanon County, nearly two thirds of pantry visitors say they receive food they like “often or always,” compared to just over one third of visitors at pre-pack distributions. Additionally, the percentage of neighbors who report no food waste is 14 points higher at choice pantries than at pre-pack pantries.





Providing foods that people do not prefer “often or always” leads to higher food waste, so there is a significant economic reason for pantries of all distribution types to focus on ensuring folks receive foods they like and will use. Pre-pack distributions should work to increase choice as much as possible, but without full choice, it is even more important for these distributions to ensure they are asking their pantry visitors what foods they are interested in to increase the likelihood people like the pre-packed foods and are forced to throw out less food. Over 90% of people who receive foods they like from their pantry “often or always” report less than 10% food waste compared to just 65% of people who report receiving foods they like “sometimes, rarely, or never” from their food pantry.

**Frequency of Receiving Desired Food and Food Waste by Pantry Model**

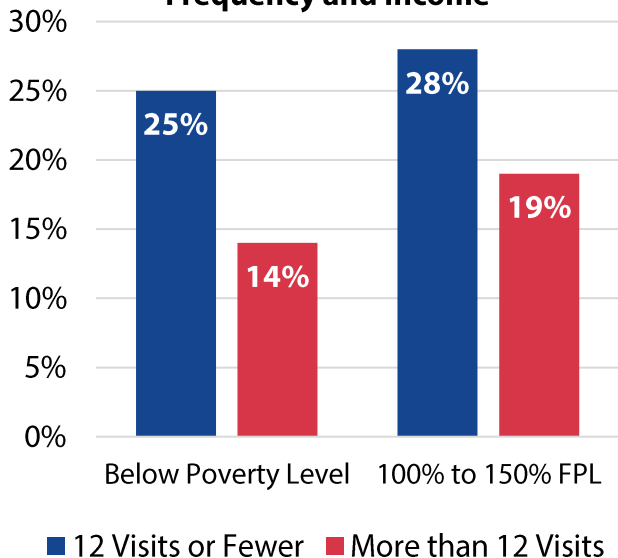


**Frequency of Allowable Visits**

Perhaps the most unique strength of the Lebanon County charitable food system is the frequency with which households can utilize their local food pantry. Pantry visitors are allowed to visit their local pantry at least once every two weeks at 80% of pantries in the county, and in one case are allowed to visit their pantry every week. This is a contrast to the practice of restricting pantry visitors to only one visit per month commonly seen in other counties.

Lebanon County households report coming to food pantries at the frequency with which they need help. One neighbor expressed during an interview that access to a regular (monthly) distribution as well as drop-in opportunities for perishable items like bread helps them meet their needs. However, asking for *more* help from the pantry was discouraged.

**Food Pantry Visitors Skipping Meals Almost Every Month by Visit Frequency and Income**



*“I try to go to [the pantry] once a month for the government [food], and then like, every couple of days, and check out and see what they got on the inside. Because I get too much help from the other one that I just spoke of, they won't help me. I went too many times already this year. So I'm thinking like, what, two or three times?”*

Lebanon County’s widespread policy of allowing people to visit food pantries more than once per month has demonstrable impacts on people’s food security status. Among households who report visiting a food pantry more than 12 times in the last year, very low food security status and the percentage of people who report going hungry every month is 32% to 44% lower than among people who report visiting a food pantry 12 times or fewer in the last year when holding the ratio of income to poverty level constant.

This data, for one of the first times, shows that pantry policies on frequency of allowable visits have a meaningful, measurable impact on food security status among food pantry visitors. For this reason, pantries should allow pantry visitors to come as often as capacity allows, and the policies in the Lebanon County charitable food system can be an example for other counties regarding what is possible around allowable visit frequency and the expected scale of the impact in allowing people to visit food pantries more than once per month.

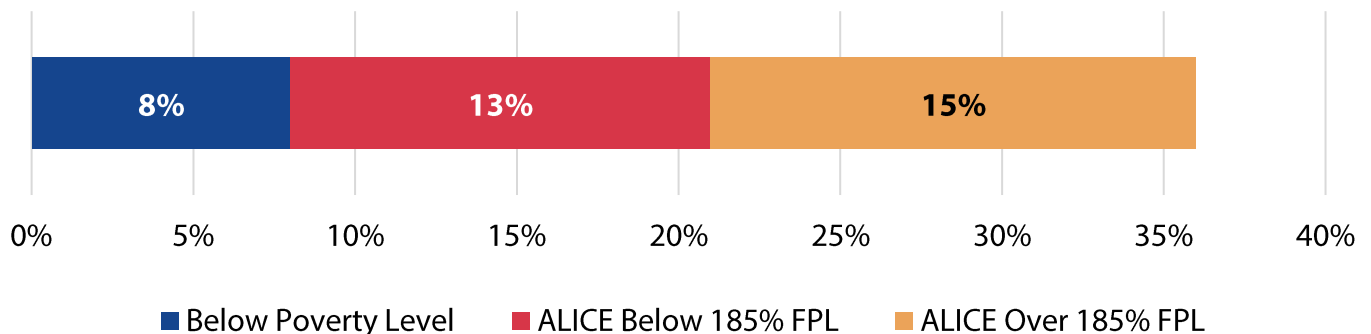
As will be detailed later in the report, SNAP receipt has a substantial impact on very low food security rates, in addition to visit frequency. Holding SNAP receipt and income constant, a higher visit frequency reduces experiences of very low food security. Together, receipt of SNAP and a higher visit frequency reduce the chances that people experience very low food security or cut or skip meals every month.

### Support for Households Over the Income Threshold

Another strength of the Lebanon County charitable food system is the availability of food to people who earn too much money to qualify for state or federal-funded charitable food through programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). The current eligibility threshold for these programs is 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL), which equates to \$36,482 for a household of two \$55,500 for a household of four, according to 2023 federal poverty guidelines.<sup>7</sup>

Given how low the 185% FPL threshold is relative to costs of living, there are a significant number of households above 185% FPL who still live paycheck to paycheck and may need assistance from the charitable food system to make ends meet. These households are a subset of households classified as ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) by the United Way. ALICE households earn more than the federal poverty level but less than a county-adjusted minimum standard of living in Pennsylvania. There are more than 15,000 households classified as ALICE by the United Way in Lebanon County, accounting for more than a quarter (28%) of the county's population.<sup>8</sup>

**Lebanon County Households - ALICE and Poverty**



Adjusting ALICE estimates to include only households who have incomes over 185% FPL shows that 15% of Lebanon County residents are classified as ALICE but do not qualify for state or federally funded charitable food. Fortunately, in Lebanon County, every single pantry reports serving these households with donated food rather than turning them away. This means that Lebanon County residents are not restricted by income when visiting a food pantry for assistance, representing a major strength of the county's charitable food system.

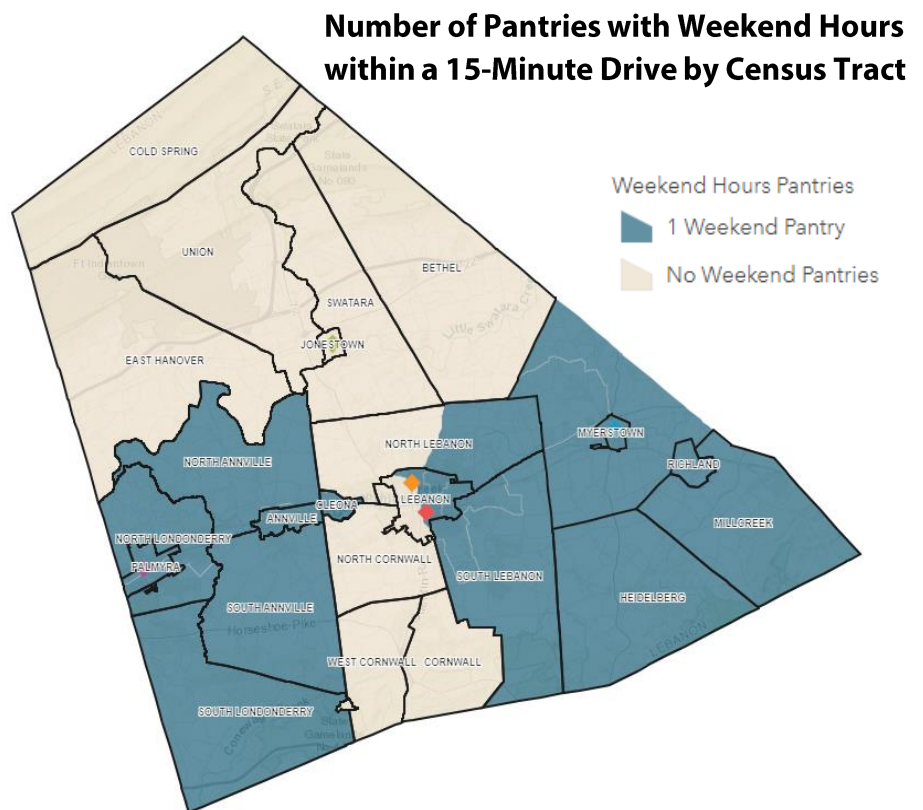
## Days and Hours of Operation

Because many food insecure individuals and households also work, it is important for pantries to offer services at times that work for a wide variety of people. Among food insecure individuals who were surveyed at non-food pantry locations and who did not currently visit food pantries, 16% reported hours of operation as a barrier to pantry access, and among people who do visit pantries, 9% reported that hours of operation still presented a significant barrier to them. Weekend and evening pantry hours are especially important because the majority of food insecure households of working age are employed full time. This analysis identifies areas of Lebanon County where evening and weekend access is the most limited for neighbors.

To estimate the largest gaps in access to weekend and evening distributions, this analysis records the number of pantries within a 15-minute drive time that offer weekend and evening distributions. This 15-minute drive time radius is a generous definition of access, as a 15-minute drive time may not be reasonable in every case; for example, households that lack easy access to a personal vehicle. In addition, while this analysis does account for current service territory restrictions, a full 15-minute drive radius covers and crosses several different municipalities, and one can reasonably presume that pantries in other areas of the county are likely less known to people than pantries that are in their own area. This means that accessibility may be overestimated due to information gaps and lack of awareness of pantries in other municipalities. Therefore, any access gaps identified in this analysis should be considered relatively extreme, and there should be high confidence in the significance of the identified gaps.

The map at right shows areas of Lebanon County that do not have access to a food pantry on a weekend. There are currently two pantries open on weekends; they lie on the eastern and western ends of the county, which means that western Lebanon City, the Cornwall area, and northern Lebanon county do not have access to charitable food distributions on a weekend. Because of these gaps, 35% of food insecure neighbors countywide lack access to a weekend distribution.

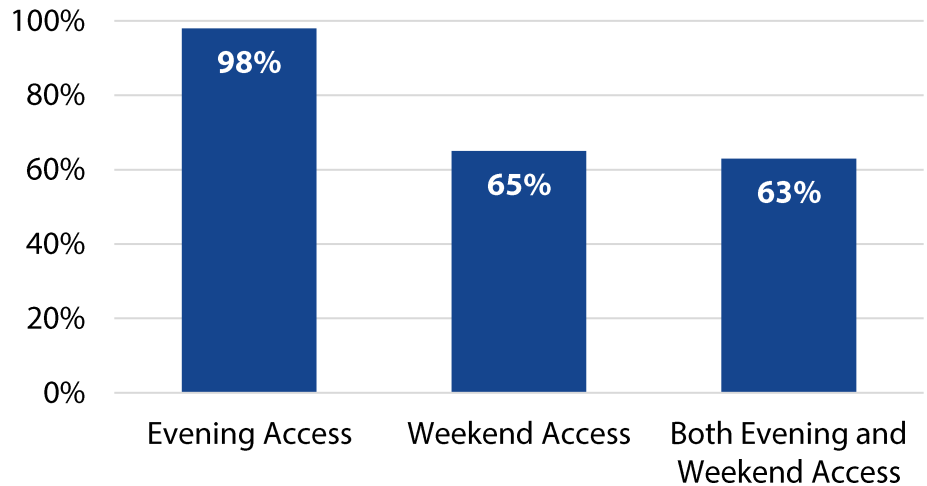
Weekend hours are particularly desired by pantry visitors in Lebanon City as 9% of pantry visitors reported that weekend distributions were their only time preference, compared to 6% for the county overall. Pantry visitors were able to select as many days and times they preferred pantries be open as they liked, and a total of 20% selected weekend distributions and another option (weekday morning, weekday afternoon, weekday evening). This means that even among current pantry visitors, weekend distributions are desired, and increasing weekend access could bring in additional people who are unable to visit pantries during the week.





Turning to evening access, nearly everyone in Lebanon County has access to a weekend distribution, except for individuals who reside in the census tract including Millcreek Township and Richland borough. This means that just 220 food insecure individuals (or 1.9% of the countywide food insecure population) do not have access to an evening distribution, while 98% of food insecure individuals in Lebanon County do have evening access. Combining the two off-hours access measures reveals that everyone in Lebanon County has access to either an evening or weekend food pantry distribution, with 63% of residents having access geographic access to both options.

**Percent of Food Insecure Lebanon County Residents with Access to Off-Hours Pantries**



#### Other Strengths of the Lebanon County Charitable Food System

Lebanon County benefits from a robust Food Policy Council in the form of the Lebanon County Healthy Food Access Action Team. This coalition includes participants from the charitable food system, the health system, community organizations, representatives from county and local government, senior program representatives, local food producers, and administrators of key government programs, such as WIC. This entity serves as a place to jointly prioritize and coordinate initiatives and to communicate developments from agency to agency, and the consistency of attendees and meetings makes this Action Team uniquely well-suited for long-term joint initiatives to address issues identified both in this report at present and in the future as the needs Lebanon County residents face evolve.

One additional unique component of the charitable food system in Lebanon County is the fact that no pantries require that neighbors make appointments to receive services. This can be a strength of the system, in that people without consistent access to transportation or with irregular schedules can show up to receive food within distribution times whenever they are able. Strict appointment requirements can discourage visits to food pantries and can limit the number of people who can receive food, depending on the program design. While the lack of strict appointments requirements has its benefits, it also has downsides; a lack of scheduled appointments can contribute to the formation of lines and long wait times, especially at or before the beginning of scheduled distribution times, which can significantly counteract the positive impact of this flexibility. Pantries should work to find a balance between the flexibility that having no appointments brings and the downsides of increased wait times and long lines, as will be discussed later in this section.

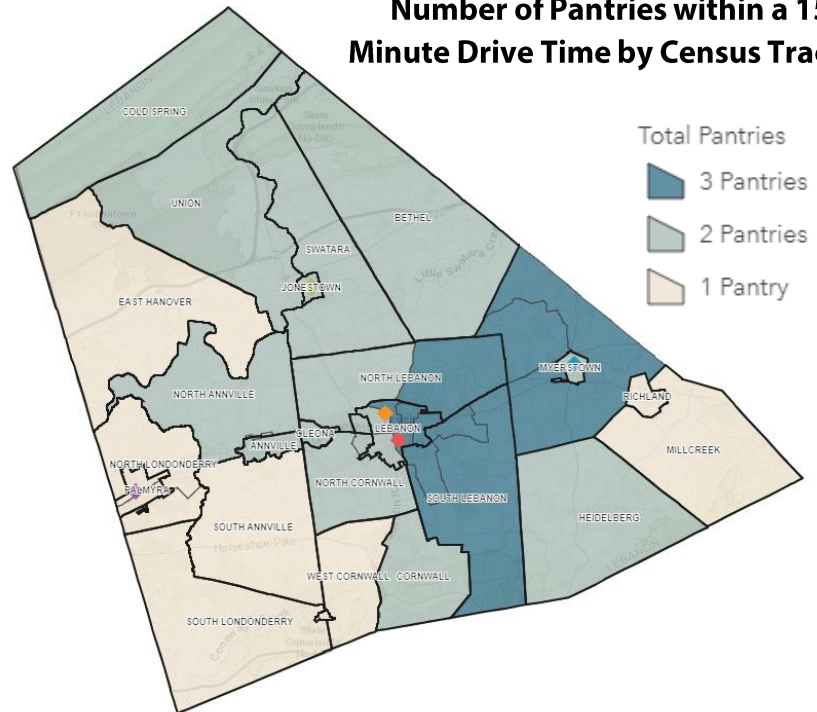
## Geographic Access to Charitable Food

To understand pantry access at a sub-county level, this analysis examines the number of food pantries within a 15-minute drive of each census tract center of population in Lebanon County. This section focuses on food pantries that are open to everyone regardless of age or status. Therefore, youth programs, MilitaryShares, and senior programs are not included.

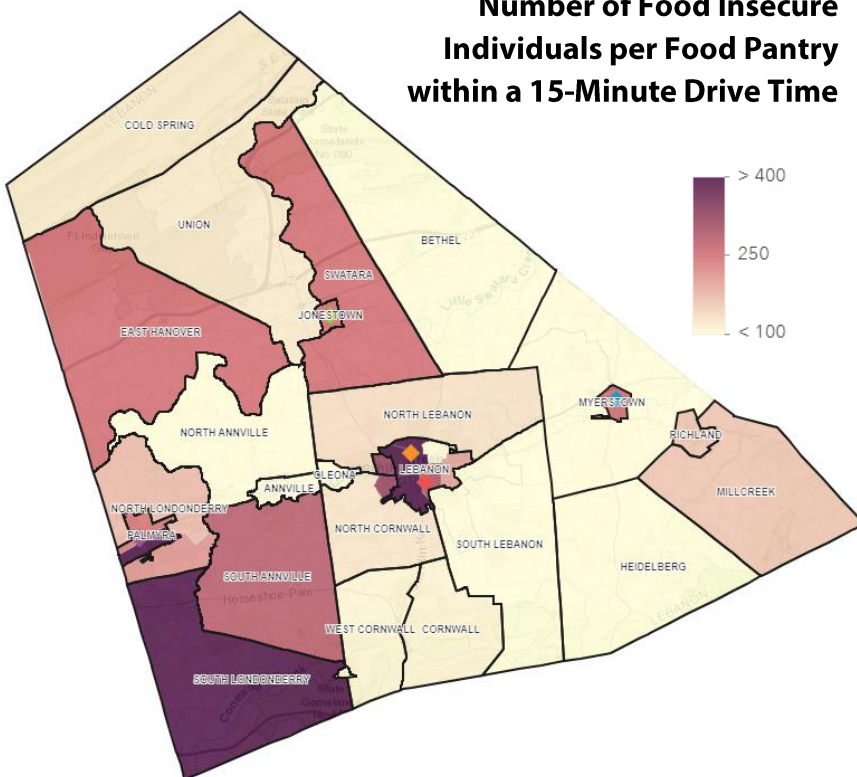
Overall, there are relatively few food pantries in Lebanon County. No census tract has access to more than three pantries within a 15-minute drive time, and most have access to two or fewer. As such, pantries have a large number of people to serve, which can strain capacity. Food pantry visitors are mostly limited to the pantry closest to them, so they have no ability to “vote with their feet” if they are dissatisfied with the pantry in their neighborhood due to service territory restrictions, which limit the radius from which people might visit a pantry. The access maps are adjusted for these service territory restrictions.

In Lebanon City, food pantry visitors have at least two options within a 15-minute drive time, but access is still limited based on transportation arrangements for those who do not have access to a car or carpool option.

### Number of Pantries within a 15-Minute Drive Time by Census Tract



### Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Food Pantry within a 15-Minute Drive Time



The map at left shows the number of food insecure individuals per accessible pantry by census tract. To generate this map, the number of food insecure individuals in each census tract was divided by the number of food pantries within a 15-minute drive, which can then be used to identify areas in the county with a high number of food insecure individuals but lower access to pantries.

Residents of South Londonderry Township have the most limited access to charitable food providers, with over 300 food insecure individuals who have access to only one pantry within a 15-minute drive, but southern Palmyra and East Hanover also have elevated numbers of food insecure individuals per available food pantry.

Lebanon City has a high number of food insecure individuals per available food pantry, with the western half of the city having the most food insecure individuals with the least access to a food pantry within a 15-minute drive time. The westernmost census tracts in Lebanon City contain more than 1,750 food insecure individuals who have access to just two food pantries within a 15-minute drive time.

As mentioned previously, while drive time analysis is a useful metric for access, it does not account for households who do not have regular access to a personal vehicle. Indeed, an estimated 1,800 households in the city of Lebanon do not have a vehicle, according to American Community Survey data.

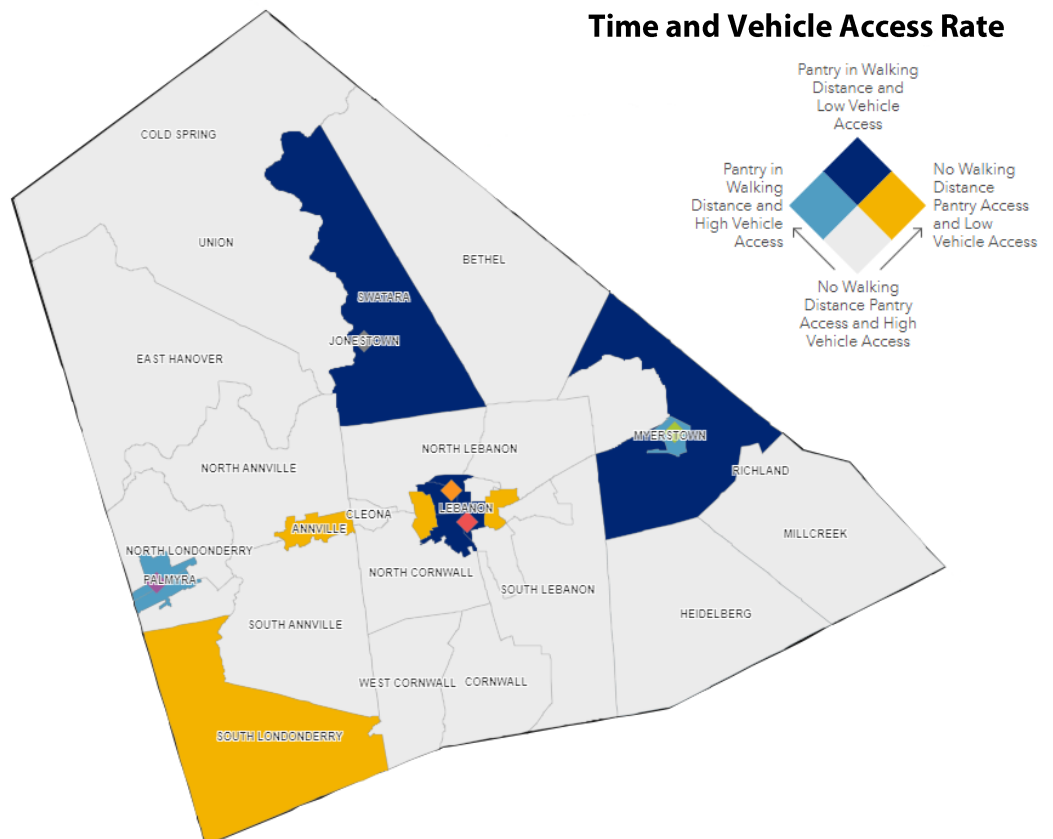
An ArcGIS 15-minute walk time analysis showed that 88% of households in Lebanon City without access to a vehicle have access to a food pantry within a 15-minute walk distance. This includes 84% of all food insecure individuals in the city, who are concentrated in the four westernmost census tracts in Lebanon City. The relatively strong walking time access component is because the pantries in Lebanon City are in different areas of the city and relatively centrally located. However, even a walk-time analysis can still overstate geographic access in Lebanon City because elderly and disabled individuals may face challenges with traveling 15 minutes on foot. Furthermore, no census tract has more than one food pantry within walking distance, so pantry options are still significantly limited for people without access to a vehicle, as will be discussed in the next section.

The map to the right shows the parts of the county with low vehicle access (more than 100 households without a vehicle) and no pantry in walking distance highlighted in yellow. These areas are likely well-suited for a pop-up, mobile distribution, or additional pantry within walking distance.

**Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Food Pantry within a 15-Minute Drive Time, Lebanon City**



**Number of Pantries within a 15 Minute Walk Time and Vehicle Access Rate**



## Transportation

According to the results of surveys conducted at pantries across Lebanon County, more than half of all neighbors in Lebanon do not drive themselves to their food pantries, including 20% of individuals who rely on rides from friends or family, and 21% of pantry visitors who walk.

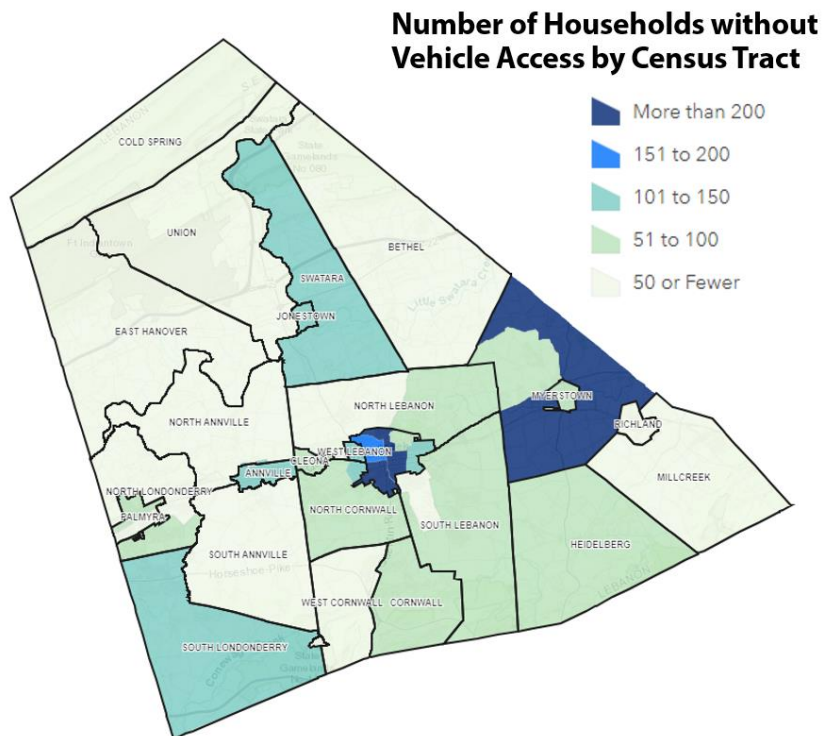
In Lebanon City, pantry visitors are much less likely to drive than in other parts of Lebanon County. Nearly a third (32%) report that they walk to their food pantries, and a quarter (23%) report sharing rides with others. An additional 5% of pantry visitors in the city take a taxi or public transportation to reach their food pantry. Respondents from Lebanon City cited transportation as a barrier to reaching their food pantry at twice the rate of those outside the city, 20% to 10%, respectively.

Nearly a quarter of neighbors who walk or carpool cite their lack of easy access to a car or public transportation as a reason they have trouble accessing their food pantry. Inclement weather conditions can deter individuals who walk from accessing their pantries. Those who carpool are dependent on the availability of others to reach their food pantry; one pantry visitor commented through her survey that if she doesn't have a ride, she doesn't go to the food pantry that week.

Individuals in the city who use public transportation must often set much of their day aside to reach their food pantry with multiple bus route and walk times to consider. Pantry partner interviews noted that public transportation is not yet robust enough to reliably transport people around the city, or from the city to other parts of the county where employment opportunities are available.

Transportation is notable barrier to address in Lebanon to increase access for individuals in need. Nearly 15% of food insecure individuals who are not accessing food pantries indicated restricted transportation access as a reason they do not visit a food pantry. Transportation arrangements should be taken into consideration by pantry coordinators given that it is a barrier for both individuals who use food pantries are those who would like to but are not able to.

To address this challenge, pantries should consider partnering with organizations that can provide transportation services or promoting shuttle services in the area. Matching pantry opening times with local bus routes could ensure that more people are able to access the food pantry. In addition, where possible, pantries should provide bags over boxes as a means to carry food home, as bags are a more manageable way to transport items for people for people who walk to their food pantries.

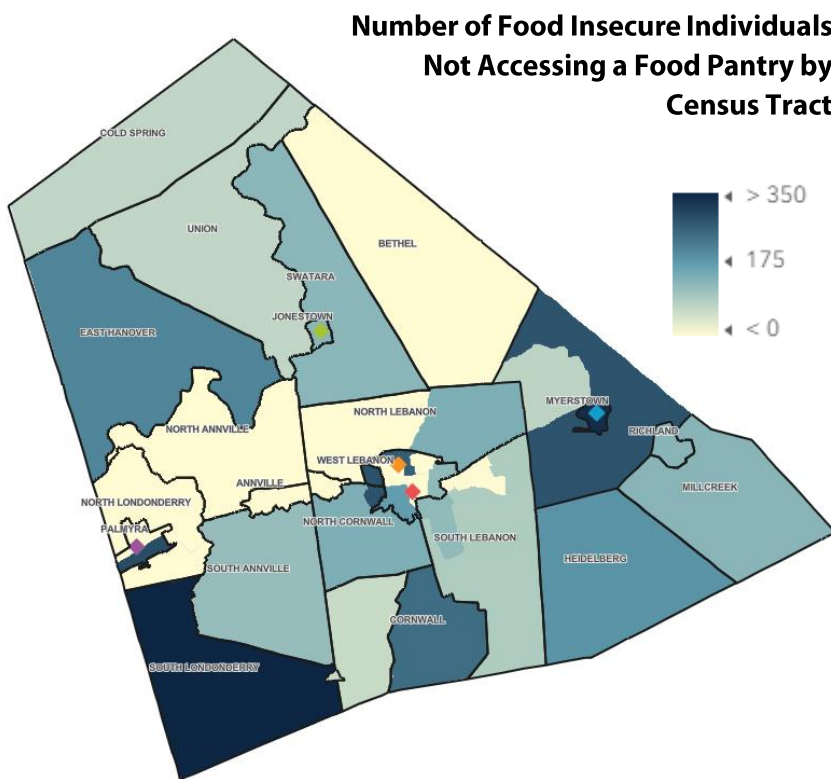




## Utilization of Food Pantry Services by Census Tract

Transportation challenges and geographic access analysis, while both useful to provide perspectives for households with and without vehicle access, do not reveal utilization of food pantry services by food insecure individuals, which is the most accurate measure of actualized access. To adjust for this downside of strictly geographic access, the following analysis compares pantry visit data from pantries using Service Insights on MealConnect (SIMC) between September 2022 and August 2023 to Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap food insecurity estimates to calculate food pantry utilization gaps at the census tract level.

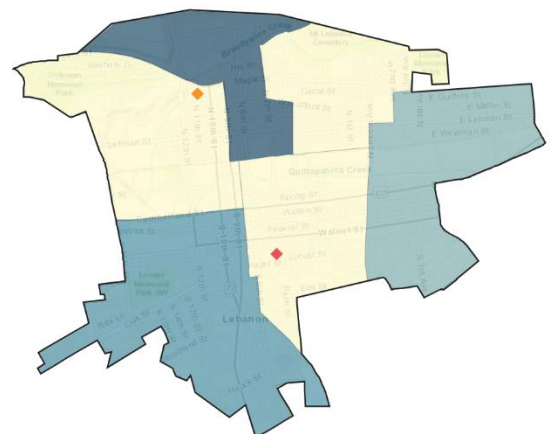
The analysis takes place in two separate steps. First, anonymized address and latitude and longitude data on the number of unique individuals served by a pantry during the selected time frame were assigned to their corresponding census tracts to calculate the number of unique individuals served from each census tract in Lebanon County. Step two subtracted the number of individuals served by a food pantry in each census tract from the number of food insecure individuals in each census tract from Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap estimates. The resulting map provides an estimate of the number of food insecure individuals not accessing food pantries by census tract.



The maps at left and below show areas where there may be pantry utilization gaps across Lebanon County and Lebanon City, with the darkest blue areas showing areas where there were more than 350 food insecure individuals not accessing a food pantry within the last year. It is clear from this analysis that individuals in South Londonderry Township have difficulty accessing food pantries. Southern Palmyra, West Lebanon, and part of North Cornwall, as well as the northern-central portion of Lebanon City, also have sizable service gaps.

Census tracts around Myerstown also appear to have significant gaps, but this analysis does not include service data from Mission Food Pantry in Myerstown, which is only available by ZIP Code. If data from the ZIP Code (17067) that overlaps with the identified area is considered, the identified census tract gaps would be significantly reduced, although it should be noted that the geographic boundaries for ZCTAs and census tracts do not align exactly. This means that the gaps identified in areas of the county outside the southeastern corner of the county are more definite.

## Number of Food Insecure Individuals Not Accessing a Food Pantry by Census Tract- Lebanon City



## Culturally Responsive Charitable Food Access

Another component of access is the availability of foods that are relevant to the people accessing the charitable food system. This analysis represents a first of many needed steps to help food pantries provide foods that meet the preferences and needs of all neighbors.

This effort is highly important because Lebanon County is, like the rest of the United States, becoming increasingly diverse (Lebanon’s Hispanic population has grown 64% in the last 10 years, increasing from 9.3% to 14.2% of the county population), and because people who are part of historically marginalized communities are disproportionately likely to be food insecure.<sup>9</sup>

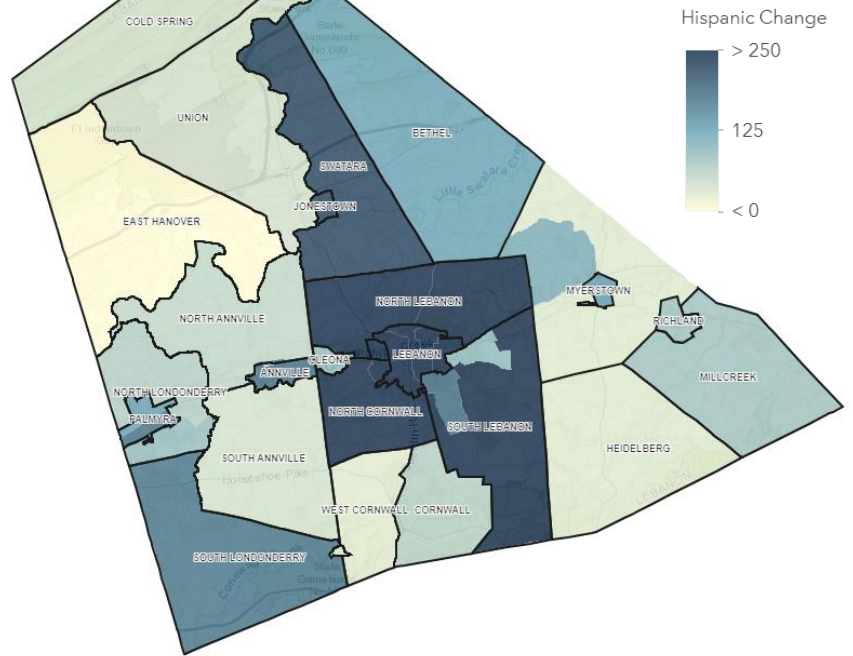
This section intends to assist in this effort by analyzing U.S. Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data to shed light on areas that have concentrated populations of people of non-Western European descent as a first step towards further work on topics like culturally relevant food sourcing and cultural competency within the charitable food network.

Every census tract in Lebanon County saw an increase in the Hispanic population over the period from 2010 to 2020, with the largest increases concentrated in central Lebanon County.

It is essential to note that Hispanic populations, and all racial and ethnic groups, are not a monolith and that culinary preferences differ significantly 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 Lebanon County using data from the ACS.

The table at right shows the 5 largest non-Western European nationality groups in Lebanon County that have foreign-born rates of more than 20%, plus Puerto Rico. In fact, Puerto Rican people comprise the largest non-Western European ancestry group by far in Lebanon County, at over 13,000 individuals, accounting for more than 9% of the county’s total population. Next largest are the Dominican and Mexican communities which account for 2,500 individuals and 1,300 individuals respectively (2% and 1% of the county population).

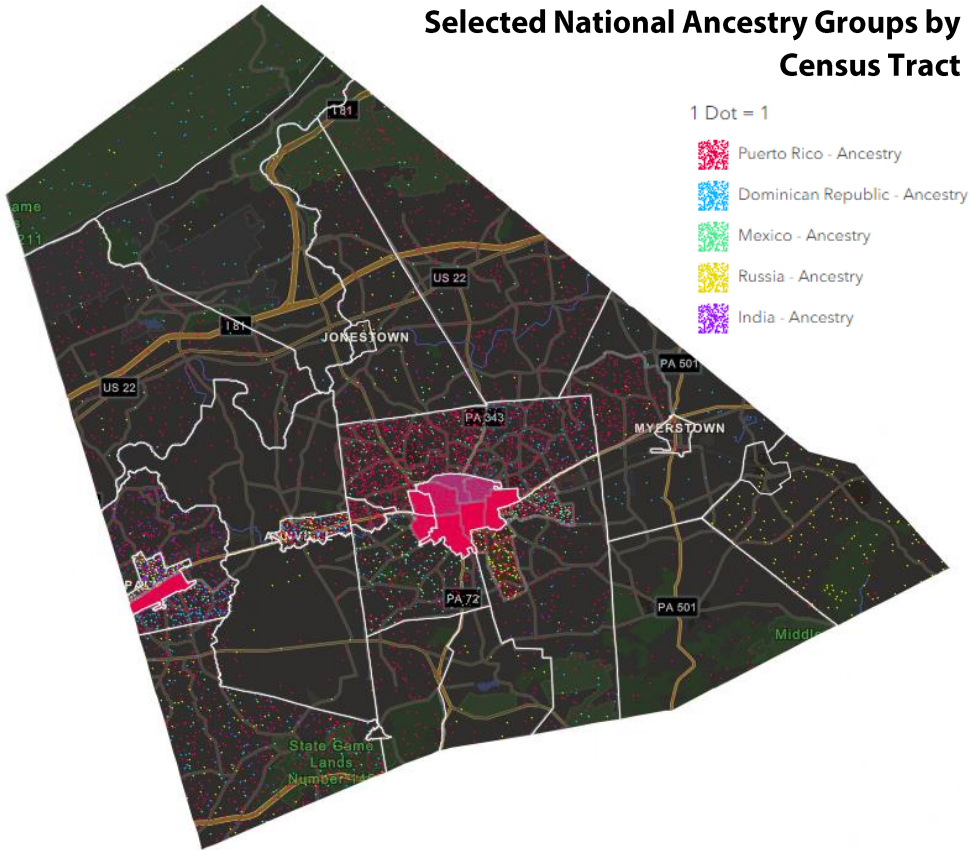
**Change in Number of Hispanic Individuals by Census Tract, 2010-2020**



Rank	Country of Origin	Ancestry	Foreign Born	Percent Foreign Born
1	Puerto Rico	13,423	N/A	N/A
2	Dominican Republic	2,586	596	23.0%
3	Mexico	1,334	472	35.4%
4	Russia	591	181	30.6%
5	India	479	271	56.6%

People from different ancestry groups are not evenly distributed across Lebanon County. This section will describe areas in which the most common non-Western European ancestry groups are concentrated.

### Selected National Ancestry Groups by Census Tract



The map of Lebanon County to the left uses a plotting method in which one dot represents one individual residing in a census tract and each color represents a different ancestry group, so it shows both the relative sizes and densities of different non-Western European ancestry groups living in that area.

Like the overall population, non-Western European populations in Lebanon County are primarily concentrated in and around the city of Lebanon and secondarily concentrated around Palmyra.

The county level view shows that the Puerto Rican population far outnumbers all other non-Western European ancestry groups and tends to predominate in most census

tracts countywide, though not all. Annville Borough is broadly diverse, including a significant number of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Russian individuals. Further away from Lebanon City, the census tract covering Richland Borough and Millcreek Township in the southeastern portion of the county is predominantly Russian in terms of its non-Western European ancestry (133 individuals).

A tighter focus on Lebanon City at right reveals several notable non-Western European communities in the city that are not visible at the countywide level due to the much larger overall size of the Puerto Rican population. Over 8,000 Puerto Rican individuals live in the city limits, which is 60% of the Puerto Rican community countywide.

People of Dominican descent have a substantial presence in Lebanon City. There are 1,762 people of Dominican descent, accounting for nearly 70% of all Dominican individuals living in Lebanon County. Dominican people living in Lebanon City mostly reside north of Walnut St (US Route 422). Census Tract 4.01 in north-central Lebanon City contains just over 650 Dominican residents, or about a quarter of the countywide Dominican community.

### Selected National Ancestry Groups by Census Tract - Lebanon City



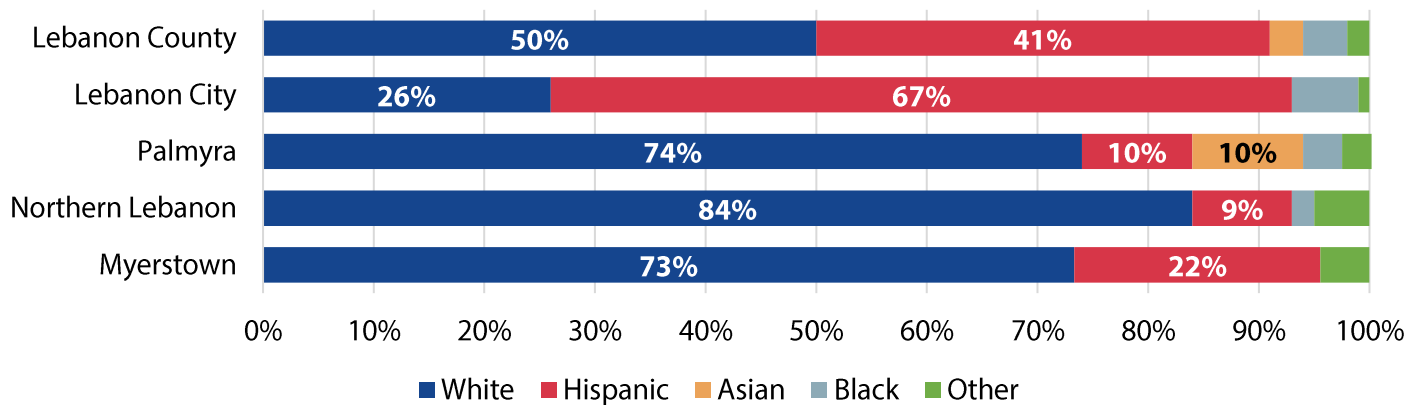


## Culture Identified with Outside the Mainland United States and Food Preferences

One question the neighbor surveys asked was whether the respondent identified with any culture outside the mainland United States, and if so, which one. In Lebanon County, the two most common cultures survey respondents identified with were Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, which aligns with ACS data.

The demographics of visitors to the charitable food system reflect trends in the county population and even indicate trends not yet identifiable with ACS data. Half of surveyed pantry visitors are non-Hispanic white individuals, while just over 40% of pantry visitors are Hispanic. Just like the ancestry analysis above varies by area of the county, the demographic breakdown varies dramatically by pantry location, with Hispanic individuals making up 67% of pantry visitors in Lebanon City, and between 10-25% in other parts of the county. Only Palmyra has a significant percentage of Asian individuals, many of Nepali descent, and this important demographic trend is not yet reflected in ACS data.

**Race/Ethnicity Breakdown Among Pantry Survey Participants**



The surveys asked neighbors to list two to three foods they need or want but cannot always get from the food pantry. Over three quarters (78%) of all survey respondents, regardless of ancestry, indicated at least one item they want but cannot always get, while 64% reported three food preferences. Combining data about the cultures with which pantry visitors identify with their reported food preferences allows for a high-level assessment of types of foods the charitable food system should focus on trying to provide.

The table to the right provides the rankings of the top five food categories by reported ancestry. The categories are the same regardless of ancestry, which provides clear direction on the most important

Food Preferences by Reported Ancestry						
Rank	Overall	Percent	Puerto Rico	Percent	Dominican Republic	Percent
1	Meat	31%	Meat	49%	Meat	41%
2	Produce	20%	Rice	24%	Produce	41%
3	Milk	9%	Milk	22%	Rice	31%
4	Eggs	8%	Produce	19%	Eggs	21%
5	Rice	8%	Eggs	19%	Milk	21%

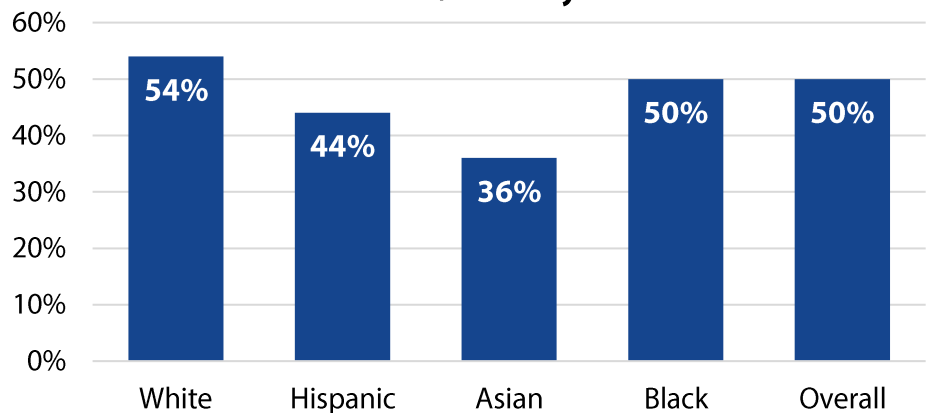
foods for the charitable food system to provide. The most common reported preference regardless of ancestry is meat, with no significant differences in the type of meats preferred.

The order of the list is variable for other food groups, with rice being the fifth most desired food preference among all survey participants but the second and third most desired food preference among Puerto Rican and Dominican survey participants, respectively. This indicates that charitable food providers should ensure they are providing rice. Rice is a global staple that was also desired by survey respondents who identified with South Asian cultures.



Reported frequency of receiving desired foods “often or always” varies significantly by race/ethnicity in Lebanon County overall and within pantry locations. Overall, white individuals report receiving desired foods “often or always” at a 54% clip, compared to 50% for Black individuals and just 44% and 36% for Hispanic and Asian individuals, respectively. This means there is significant room to grow in improving charitable food offerings for Hispanic and Asian individuals as well as overall, because just 50% of all surveyed pantry visitors said they received foods they liked “often or always”.

**Percentage of Respondents who Receive Desired Foods "Often or Always" at Food Pantries by Race/Ethnicity**



Among food insecure non-food pantry survey respondents who do not currently visit a food pantry, a total of 11% of individuals report that they believe food pantries do not have the foods they would like or need. Therefore, to encourage people who are food insecure but not currently visiting food pantries to begin visiting, it is imperative to ensure that food offerings are sufficiently catered to people’s desired food offerings. Additionally, when conducting awareness campaigns, pantries should specifically promote the high-quality foods they offer, as this may help households with previous negative experiences around food offerings at pantries to be willing to try utilizing the charitable food system again.

#### Language Access at Pantries

The language in which the neighbor survey was most frequently administered differed dramatically by a pantry’s location in the county. In Lebanon City, nearly half of all pantry survey respondents took the survey in Spanish, while rates were much lower in other areas of the county. At least one neighbor took a survey in Spanish at all pantry survey locations in the county, indicating use of Spanish countywide. Overall, 25% of surveys were taken in Spanish.

This data indicates the importance of increasing the availability of Spanish-speaking and bilingual volunteers and staff at food pantries across the county, but especially in and around the city of Lebanon. A total of 13.5% of households in Lebanon City report speaking English less than “very well” according to the ACS. Other languages spoken by pantry visitors, according to partner surveys, include Nepali, Arabic, and French and Haitian Creole.

## Neighbor Experience at Food Pantries

The charitable food system meets critical needs, with neighbors relying on pantries to help make ends meet. However, many neighbors have had negative experiences at food pantries, pointing to poor treatment from volunteers and staff, long lines, and food that runs out before the end of distribution or is dramatically different from the beginning to the end of distribution. Improving the neighbor experience in each of these components is integral to maximizing the positive impact of the charitable food system.

### Pantry Volunteer and Staff Treatment

Negative volunteer and staff treatment is the major driver of poor food pantry experiences in Lebanon. Neighbors reported feeling judged or policed and could recount specific interactions with pantry workers.

*I remember in Lebanon, a lady looked at me and said, 'Why are you even here?' I was like 'Excuse me? I need food.' She said, 'You don't look like somebody who can't pay for their own food.' I just stood there and was like what do I say to her. How are you judging me. I was wearing scrubs, so she thought I was a nurse. No sweetheart, I clean for a living. This is just the uniform they want me to wear. 'No, you're a nurse,' 'No, I clean for \$7.50 an hour.'* - Focus group participant

A neighbor responding to survey questions shared her experience:

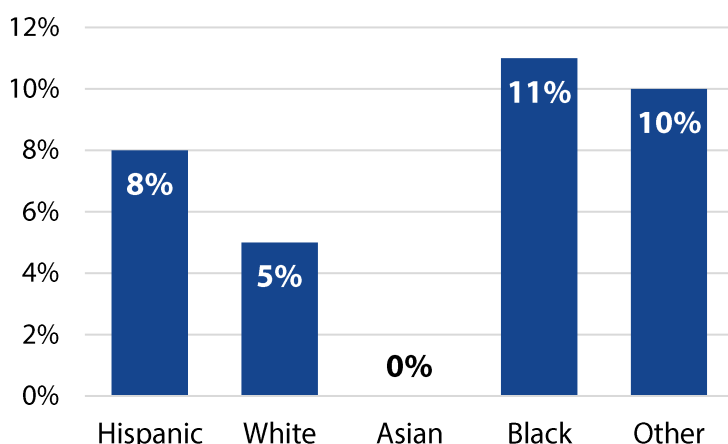
*"That man there [points to a volunteer about 30 feet away], he said I took too many cans of tomato soup. He made me empty my bag right there and counted everything. I didn't take more than I was allowed. I just steer clear of him now when I come here, because I didn't do anything wrong."*

Some interactions with pantry volunteers and staff have been so negative for some pantry visitors that they have decided to not return for services, despite needing them.

*I had an incident when my kids were younger and it was very embarrassing. I was getting food stamps, but I didn't go [to the pantry] asking for food, just for a quart of milk. That's it, a little quart of milk. And the lady yelled real loud 'Don't you get food stamps?' That was really embarrassing. I never went back. I am still struggling here and there but I prefer not going back. - Focus group participant*

The need is so severe for many households in Lebanon County that many pantry visitors disclosed that they go to their food pantries despite the poor treatment. Reported feelings of judgement through neighbor surveys are as high as 10% of all pantry visitors at some pantries, with an average of 6% across the whole county, and an additional 9% saying they Don't Know or Prefer not to Answer.

**Percent of Respondents Feeling Judged by Race/Ethnicity**



Poor pantry experiences show significant disparities by race and ethnicity, as Black and Hispanic pantry visitors report feeling judged at twice the rate of white pantry visitors (11% and 8%, compared to 5%). The rate of individuals feeling judged by race and ethnicity differs widely depending on the food pantry. Neighbors who visit a pantry deserve to be treated with dignity and respect by volunteers and staff; pantries that prioritize a welcoming environment for neighbors may find that work must be done regarding bias and judgement even from the friendliest and most enthusiastic volunteers.

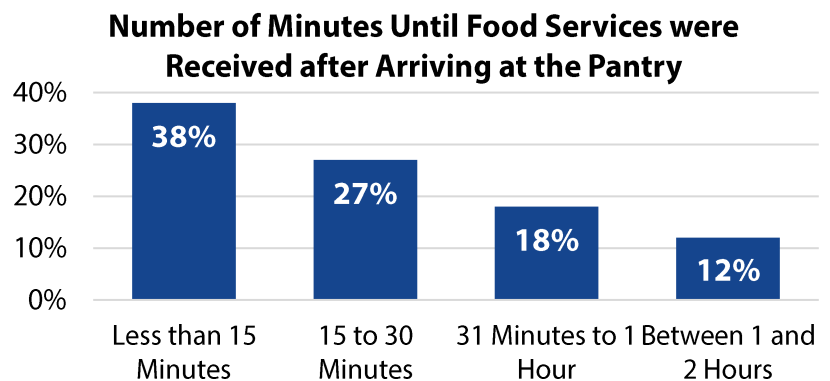
The way neighbors are treated during a pantry visit has direct impact on their future utilization of charitable food and social services. All pantries must be performing at the highest level for the system to meet the community's need, particularly given current service territory restrictions which limit the options available to choose from and the large number of food insecure individuals per pantry across most of Lebanon County. Some neighbors have attempted to visit food pantries outside of their neighborhoods in hopes of a more positive experience, but not all pantries can consistently serve individuals who do not reside in their immediate vicinities due to capacity constraints.

## Wait Times and Food Pantry Setting

### Wait Times

Wait times to receive charitable food services are consistently long across Lebanon County. A total of 30% of pantry visitors reported waiting longer than 30 minutes from the time they arrive at the pantry to the time they receive groceries. At two pantries, the wait was an hour or longer for approximately one third of their pantry visitors, with some neighbors reporting waiting for several hours before food distribution.

Neighbor attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about the pantries they visit are a result of both past and present experiences. Thus, at times some neighbors will arrive to a pantry distribution well in advance of its start time, even while they report that they usually receive the foods they like and want and have never been turned away from the pantry because it ran out of food.



Neighbors are very sensitive to changes in food offerings from the start to the end of the distribution, and many report arriving early to ensure they receive the full offerings of the pantry. In partner interviews, pantries report not “running out” of food completely, but they do acknowledge that the difficulty and cost of sourcing high demand items such as milk, eggs, and meat may mean that not all neighbors get every item at every distribution, with the situation being more severe at some pantries compared to others.

The logistics of food sourcing are mostly invisible to neighbors during a pantry visit, but the differential quality and quantity of food at some pantries from start to end creates a real sense of scarcity and influences neighbors' desire to show up as early as they can prior to a distribution. A neighbor shared in an interview:

*“The last couple of times I was there, they were like, ‘Oh, we're running out or we barely have anything.’ And they just like handed me like, two things of like, beans that you're supposed to boil, I guess, and leave in the fridge overnight in order to use them...”*

The neighbor expressed confusion over how the overall situation was handled and communicated:

*“... I'm kind of thinking why didn't they just stop the line? Why do they have us come up and stay in line to tell us... that they don't have anything? It's just weird to me... and I get embarrassed and then I just walk away.”*

### Pantry Setting and Physical Infrastructure

Another area of concern identified by food pantry visitors at each pantry surveyed in Lebanon County is the combination of wait times and pantry settings where households wait in line outdoors to access services. Very low winter temperatures and extreme high summer temperatures, along with severe weather such as snow, rain, and poor air quality can make the combination of long wait times and waiting outside dangerous. It should be noted that neighbors report not visiting pantries during inclement weather, which means the wait times and outdoor conditions prevent people from accessing the food they need.

No food pantry in Lebanon County allows people to wait inside the building as a policy, and changing policies to allow people to do so represents an immediate opportunity to improve the neighbor experience. CPFBR researchers were outdoors with pantry visitors at three of four agencies surveyed in March and April 2023. The weather was a topic of conversation at each site. Some neighbors mentioned that they had advocated for themselves by asking to wait indoors, though they were often told no, and others offered opinions on different solutions to the issue as they saw it.

The spaces that many pantries in Lebanon County operate out of have often been designed to contain food and with the neighbor experience during their food pantry visit in mind, but with less thought to the neighbor experience during any wait that they might experience. For organizations with limited indoor space, a focus on encouraging neighbors to arrive at a different time or experimentation with appointments may help to alleviate the pressure of people waiting outside of the building.

At one pantry, 40% of survey respondents surveyed prior to the start of the distribution reported waiting longer than an hour to receive food. Pantry distributions move rather quickly once long lines have cleared; just a quarter of neighbors who arrived at the same pantry at distribution time or later reported waiting more than an hour. For many neighbors, the time saved with a shorter wait is outweighed by the risk of arriving “too late” to access the full pantry offerings. This can be a challenge for pantries and neighbors to overcome; a trusted organization will offer consistent and reliable food items regardless of when a neighbor is able to arrive.

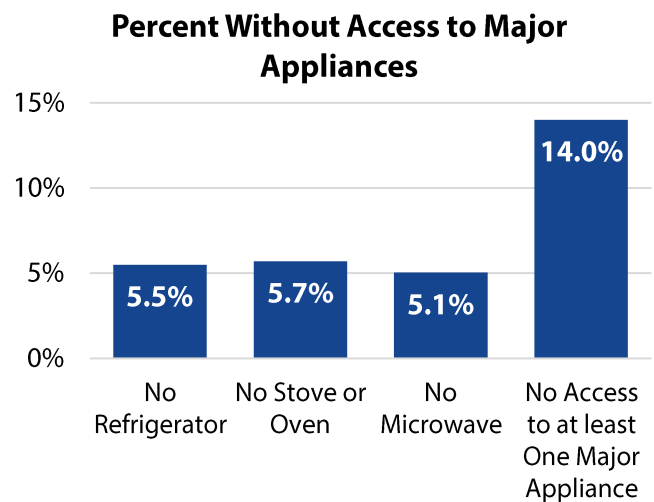
For pantries operating from buildings with multipurpose spaces available, a shift to creating indoor space as a waiting area will provide protection from the elements. This is an immediate opportunity to demonstrate care and concern for neighbors and improve the neighbor experience.

### Food Offerings and Other Non- Food Services

#### *Food Offerings*

Some pantry visitors need specific food accommodations based on their personal needs or household situation. For example, those living in hotels, shelters, or without shelter have limited access to various appliances and amenities needed to cook and store food.

Through neighbor surveys, 14% of pantry visitors indicated that they do not have access to at least one major appliance. The graph to the right shows that between 5% to 6% of pantry visitors in Lebanon currently lack access to a refrigerator, stove, or microwave.



Pantry coordinators should continue to make accommodations for individuals who report needing foods that require less preparation, and even seek this information from neighbors during distribution. Some partners in nearby counties provide screener questions to their pantry visitors on half-sheets of paper to determine the types of foods they need based on their living situation. This is one small adjustment that can go a long way in ensuring that neighbors continue to receive foods they can and will eat.

In addition, pantries should continuously check and inspect the foods they offer to ensure that neighbors are always receiving foods they can safely eat. Multiple neighbors reported through survey comments and interviews that they receive expired foods or moldy bread, which means they have fewer groceries they can actually eat and are being served less-than-dignifying options.

### Non-Food Services

Many pantries recognize that the households they serve may need things like diapers, clothing, toiletries, and other essential items that are costly and not covered by SNAP benefits. Some pantries in Lebanon provide these items through distribution when possible, and two pantries have clothing banks. Neighbors who participated in interviews expressed appreciation for their pantries' clothing banks. One food pantry also assists visitors with their utility bills.

Another partner collaborates with a local organization to provide families with seasonal gardening workshops and seed kits for children. Connecting neighbors to local workshops and classes can help engage them with new skills and hobbies while also continuing to foster community around the pantry.

Focus group participants expressed feelings of gratitude and relief when discussing other services offered by the pantries they frequent.

### Partner Experience and Food Sourcing

A positive neighbor experience is largely dependent on a pantry's overall capacity and ability to operate smoothly. Through surveys and interviews, partners identified challenges related to food sourcing and general operation. The most common themes mentioned by partners include challenges with funding, volunteer capacity, and availability of certain foods.

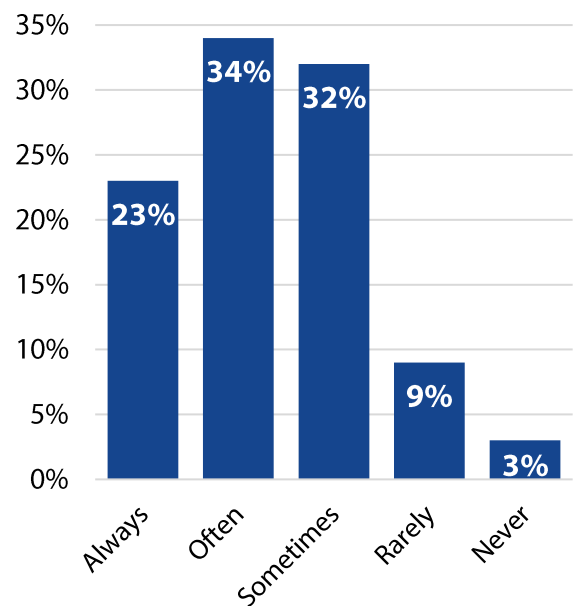
Like neighbors, partners raised concerns about receiving spoiled or expired foods from their donors and vendors. This is an issue across the whole charitable food system and must be met with quality control checks across every stage of the food chain. The quality of food that neighbors receive can be a deciding factor in whether a household returns for services or not.

The graph to the right demonstrates how often neighbors report receiving foods they desire from their food pantries in Lebanon. While the overall most requested foods by neighbors are listed earlier in this report, more specific food preferences vary by pantry. According to partner interviews, many partners strive to offer 'base' items such as pasta, rice, and vegetables to satisfy all individuals' tastes. One partner seeks to provide a "thoughtful mix" of varied recipes to cater to the needs and preferences of the community.

Partners report different methods for ensuring that their food offerings align with the dietary needs and cultural preferences of their community. A few said that they check-in casually with their pantry visitors about the types of foods they are receiving. Others base their food offerings on the popularity of foods, based on what runs out first. One partner said that they use the Food Bank of the Rockies' Food Preference by Culture guide<sup>10</sup> as their "north star" when sourcing culturally relevant foods. In addition to using online references, pantries should conduct regular, short surveys with neighbors to match neighbor's tastes, dietary restrictions, and cultural preferences most accurately.

Lack of adequate funding, inflation, and increased need complicate pantry coordinators' ability to consistently provide high quality foods. Some of the foods most requested by neighbors - milk, cheese, and meat - are ordered on a limited basis and are often provided to neighbors in limited quantities because of their cost. These products are first to run out during distribution.

**Frequency of Receiving Desired Foods from Pantry**





*“Due to having a chronically tight and somewhat unpredictable budget for food sourcing, we have to leverage food donations from a variety of sources as best we can throughout the year and aim to have a ready-to-work-with inventory of mainly dry storage items,”* one food pantry director said.

A few partners have low volunteer capacity, which can disrupt the flow of services and put extra strain on existing volunteers. Having too few volunteers ultimately impacts neighbors’ experiences the most, as they are on the receiving end of any stress or anxiety displayed by the overextended workforce.

A limited volunteer force can directly impact a pantry’s ability to offer certain foods on any given week because there are few available drivers to pick up retail foods. When they miss a donation pick-up, one partner noted, they are likely to provide more dry food offerings than they would like to.

### Non-Pantry Visitor Survey Results

Non-food pantry surveys were conducted at libraries and clinics throughout Lebanon County to identify reasons that people who are food insecure do not utilize their local food pantry.

Findings from this survey pool suggest that awareness of pantry services is the main barrier to accessing food pantry services in Lebanon. Of the households who were screened as food insecure, one third (33%) reported they did not know how or where to find a food pantry.

One neighbor noted,

*“A lot of people don't know what's out there. We don't hear about none of them. I don't know how all these people find out about these things.”*

Pantries can help increase awareness of available pantry offerings relatively simply by operating promotional campaigns such as distributing flyers through libraries and other key community institutions. A countywide, publicly accessible pantry listing which includes a distribution schedule is helpful for individuals looking to locate times and locations that work best for their needs.

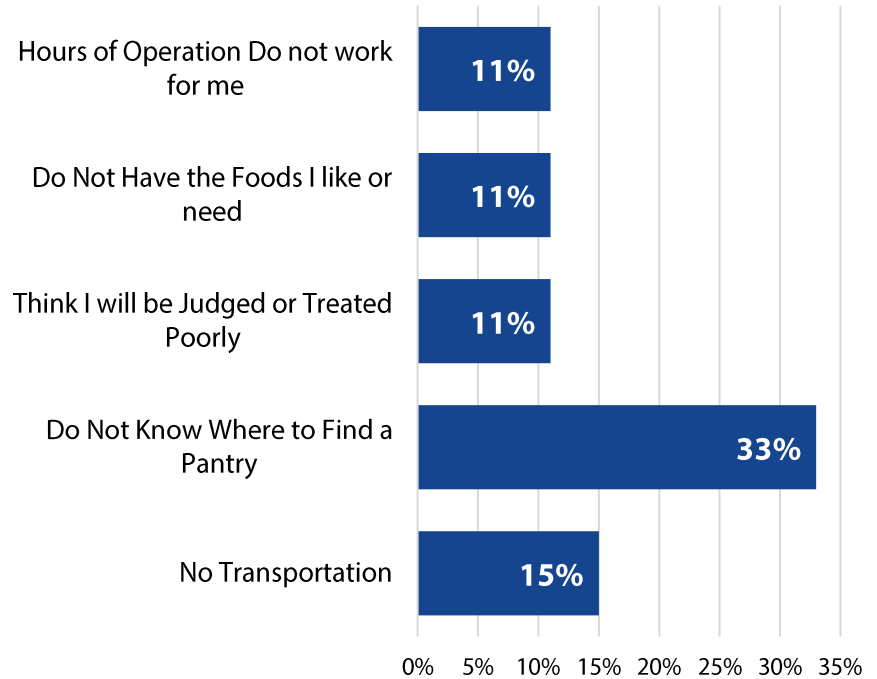
Lack of convenient transportation is the second greatest barrier individuals report to seeking food pantry services (15%). This finding is congruent with survey results from individuals who do visit food pantries, as 17% of pantry visitors across the county reported their lack of easy access to a car or public transportation as a barrier to accessing their food pantry.

The 11% of non-pantry survey respondents who indicated that pantries' current hours of operation do not work for them may benefit from extended evening or weekend hours. It is possible that some people have yet to learn about recent changes to pantries' hours of operation, which is an additional reason pantries should consider widely distributing flyers and pantry advertisements.

Individuals who reported that they anticipate being treated poorly or receiving foods they do not like could possibly be reflecting stigmas they have internalized from other people's experiences at food pantries or general stereotypes associated with charitable food.<sup>11</sup> This finding is another important reason to prioritize the neighbor experience above everything else. As discussed

throughout this section of the report, many individuals visit pantries already nervous about and sensitive to poor treatment. An improved neighbor experience can help dispel internalized stigmas around pantry treatment and welcome people who otherwise might be hesitant to visit food pantries.

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



## Charitable Food Access Main Findings and Recommendations

**Section 2 Finding 1: The charitable food system in Lebanon County has significant strengths in key areas, such as the availability of client choice pantry offerings, varied hours of operation, a relatively high frequency of allowable visits, and consistent policies to serve households over 185% of the federal poverty level.**

A total of 98% of Lebanon County residents have access to a client choice pantry and an evening pantry distribution within a 15-minute drive. For households who earn more than 185% of the federal poverty level, but still may need assistance from the charitable food system, there are consistent policies across the county that ensure these households are still served with donated food.

**Recommendation: These policy strengths provide a good basis for improving the neighbor experience in the charitable food system, and findings around the impact of some of these policies can be informative for other counties and at a state level.**

**Section 2 Finding 2: Neighbors who visit food pantries more are much less likely to experience very low food security, holding income categories and SNAP participation constant.**

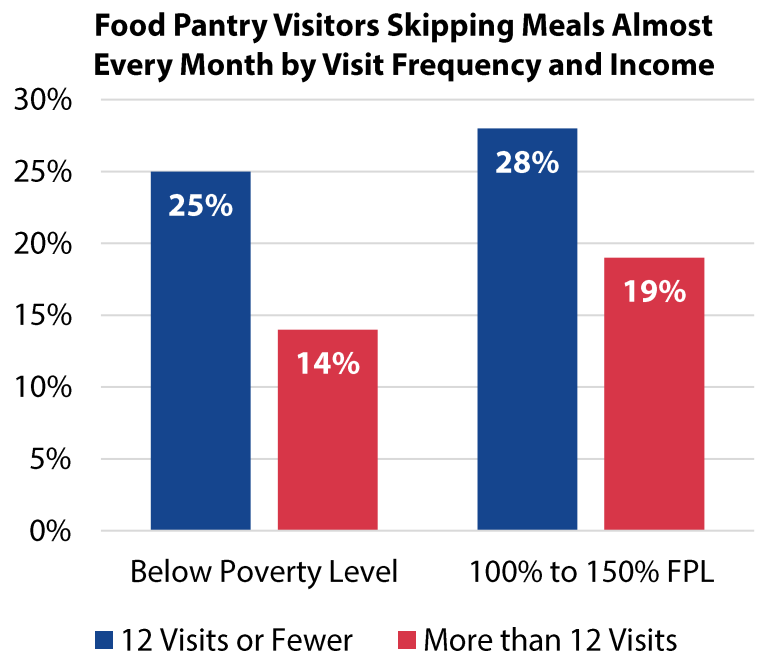
Allowing people to visit pantries more than once per month has a major impact on experiences of very low food security, including the frequency with which people report skipping meals or going hungry because there is not enough money for food. Households with incomes below the poverty level who have visited a food pantry more than 12 times in the last year report skipping meals at a 44% lower rate than households who visited 12 times or fewer in the last year.

**Recommendation: This data from Lebanon County represents some of the first evidence quantifying the charitable food system's impact on very low food security.**

It demonstrates that, where capacity allows, pantries should allow visitors to come more than once per month. This policy is important in Lebanon County because service territories throughout the county mean many people have access to just one pantry option.

**Section 2 Finding 2: There are relatively few food pantries available in Lebanon County per food pantry within a 15-minute drive, particularly in Lebanon City, and southwestern Lebanon County including Palmyra and South Londonderry Township.**

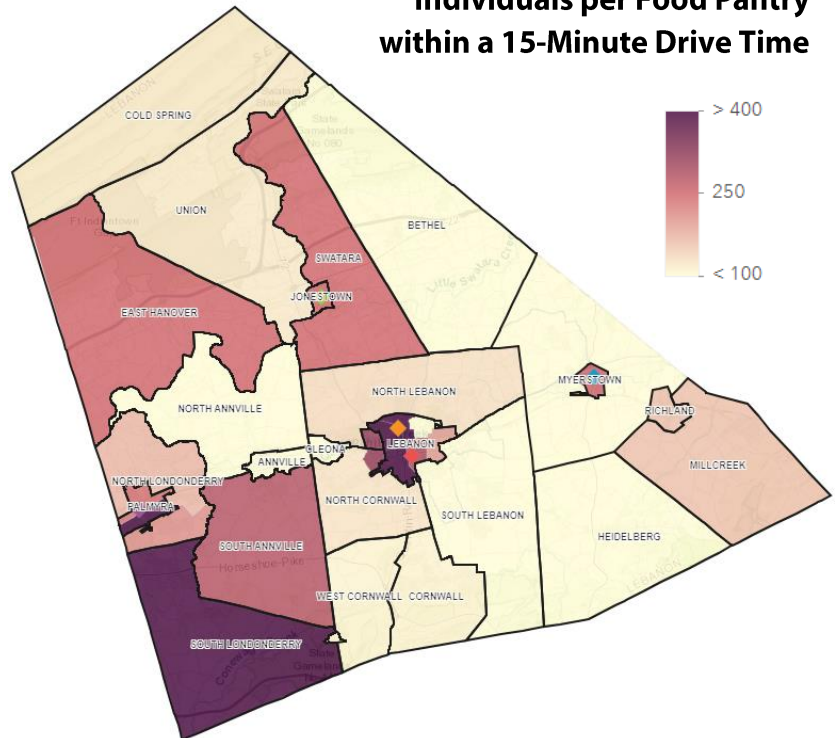
Lebanon City has more than 4,300 food insecure individuals, and each of these individuals has access to just one pantry within a 15-minute walk time. A total of 1,750 food insecure individuals in the western half of the county have access to just two pantries within a 15-minute drive time.



**Recommendation: The relatively low number of pantries available means that stakeholders should invest further in existing pantries and consider other ways to increase access, such as additional pantry locations or mobile or pop-up distributions. All pantries need to be operating at a high level to meet the level of need in the county.**

Other age or residency-restricted food distribution locations, such as at housing authorities should expand access to people of all ages or restrictions if possible. Pooling more informal pop-up efforts in supporting existing pantries or a consistent additional pantry is an opportunity to increase access.

**Number of Food Insecure Individuals per Food Pantry within a 15-Minute Drive Time**



**Section 2 Finding 3: Lack of transportation is a significant barrier to pantry utilization in Lebanon County, with 15% of households who visit food pantries countywide and 21% in Lebanon City reporting lack of easy access to a car or public transport to get to the food pantry.**

In addition, 15% of food insecure individuals surveyed at non-pantry locations reported transportation as a major barrier to utilizing the charitable food system. 11% of food pantry visitors report trouble carrying food home, and this increases to 24% when restricting the analysis to households who walk.

**Recommendation: If capacity allows, pantries could work to increase the availability of transportation services for neighbors or make deliveries to people who struggle with transportation to and from the pantry.**

Potential opportunities could include offering more formalized on-call volunteer transportation services if feasible, expanding delivery activities to senior and non-senior households, and coordinating pantry opening times with local bus routes. Pantries should work to provide bags of food over boxes to make it easier for people who walk to transport food home.

**Section 2 Finding 4: An estimation of food pantry utilization gaps at the census tract level reveals that West Lebanon, north-central Lebanon City, South Londonderry Township, and southern Palmyra have the largest number of food insecure individuals not currently utilizing the charitable food system.**

In addition, not all pantries were included in the analysis, so some additional service gaps may exist around the Myerstown area, but the maps currently are less precise in the southeast corner of the county.

**Recommendation: Pantries should conduct outreach to identified areas near their sites and test mobile or pop-up distributions, where the largest gaps exist.**

This census tract level access map represents one of the first estimates of lived food pantry utilization gaps at the census tract level, but it does not contain all data due to data sharing and electronic

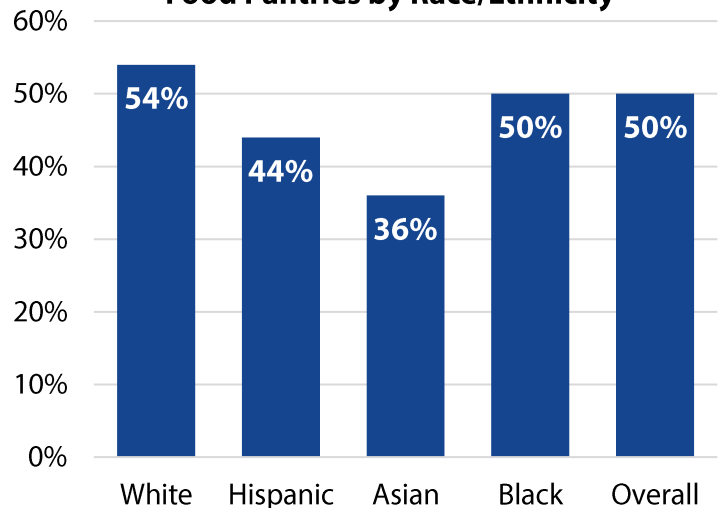
tracking limitations. Additional pantries should work to adopt electronic tracking tools, such as Service Insights on MealConnect, to simplify the neighbor intake and data sharing process. In time, the accuracy of these utilization maps will increase and allow charitable food system stakeholders to make major investment decisions based on a holistic picture of pantry service and utilization at sub-county levels.

**Section 2 Finding 5: Asian and Hispanic households are much less likely to report receiving foods they “often or always” desire at food pantries than are white, non-Hispanic food pantry visitors. Lebanon County is experiencing rapid demographic change across all areas of the county, so it is important for pantries to adapt their services accordingly.**

There are many similarities in the top five foods that people request by reported ancestry, but rice is a major differentiator between the preferences of Dominican, Puerto Rican, and South Asian neighbors compared to the overall population. The overall top five foods that people report wanting but not always finding are meat, produce, milk, eggs, and rice, with meat and fresh produce at the top of the overall list.

Every census tract saw an increase in the Hispanic population between 2010 and 2020, especially in the central part of Lebanon County. Additionally, places such as Palmyra are experiencing demographic change not yet reflected in Census Bureau data, with a large Nepali population visiting the food pantry.

**Percent of Respondents who Receive Desired Foods "Often or Always" at Food Pantries by Race/Ethnicity**



**Recommendation: Food pantries should be cognizant that the neighbors they serve are diverse and have diverse preferences. Pantries should solicit regular feedback from neighbor visitors about specific food preferences and work in coordination with retail donations, farmers, and the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank to procure requested foods more regularly.**

Focused research and inquiry into neighbor food preferences should be conducted to increase understanding of what foods are most desired but least available. In the meantime, at a minimum, rice should always be available as a staple at food pantries, as a need for rice was very clearly expressed in neighbor surveys.

**Section 2 Finding 7: Many neighbors have had negative experiences at food pantries and have pointed to poor treatment from volunteers and staff, long lines, and food that runs out before the end of a distribution or is dramatically different from the beginning to the end of a distribution as major causes of these bad experiences.**

Neighbors report that the way they are treated while visiting a food pantry directly impacts their willingness to utilize the charitable food system in the future. This means that every single interaction with a neighbor matters and all pantries need to be operating at high capacity to meet the high levels of need.

**Recommendation: The neighbor experience is not tangential to the charitable food system. It is an integral component; as such, working to improve the neighbor experience in Lebanon County across a range of dimensions in the short-term should be a priority.**



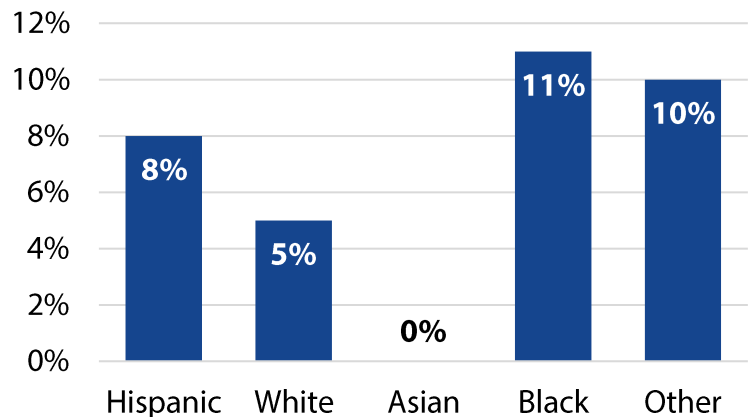
There has already been substantial progress made by some agencies in adjusting policies and distribution methods to improve the charitable food system experience in Lebanon County, but further improvements around the neighbor experience before, during, and after food is received are crucial to increasing trust in the charitable food system. Even after changes are implemented, trust will take time to build, and prioritizing the neighbor experience must be a sustained effort.

**Section 2 Finding 8: The main driver of poor neighbor experiences at food pantries across the county is negative interactions with pantry staff and volunteers. Food pantry visitors could recount specific instances of poor treatment in detail. These instances cause trauma and increased stigma around visiting pantries, which dissuade neighbors from utilizing the charitable food system.**

It is important to note that the need for charitable food assistance is particularly severe relative to the number of food pantries in Lebanon County, and that many neighbors persist in visiting food pantries despite poor treatment because they simply need the food. Neighbors report being overpoliced by volunteers, being shamed or embarrassed in front of their kids and peers, and feeling judgement from specific volunteers about their socioeconomic status and taking efforts to avoid those volunteers.

Pantry experiences also vary significantly by race/ethnicity, with Black and Hispanic households reporting feeling judged at rates double those of white pantry visitors (11% and 8%, compared to 5%), with significant differentials by pantry location as well.

**Percent of Respondents Feeling Judged at Food Pantries by Race/Ethnicity**



**Recommendation: The charitable food system should prioritize the development and implementation of trainings for pantry workers that can help them provide thoughtful, compassionate services and facilitate positive interactions with neighbors as an immediate next step to improving the pantry experience.**

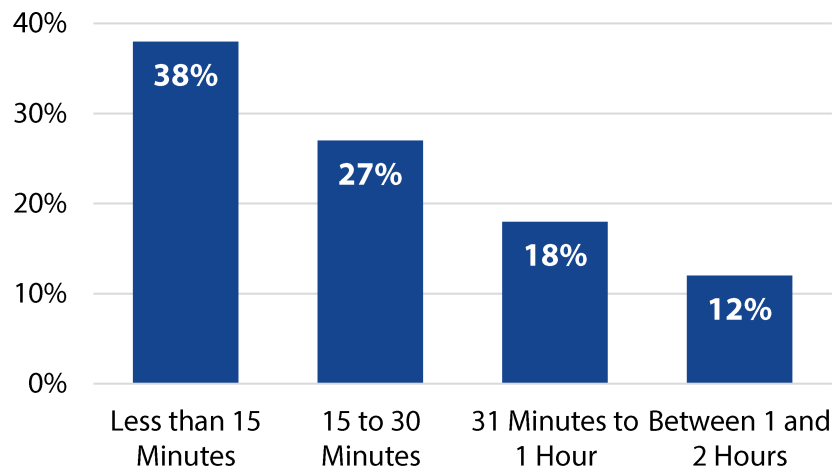
Expectations around how staff and volunteers will treat and interact with neighbors should be outlined before work begins at pantries, and neighbor-facing pantry workers should be trained in trauma-informed care practices so that they are equipped to treat all visitors with respect and dignity. Key organizations should collaborate to develop tailored materials and leverage existing trainings in the charitable food space for this purpose. Culture change takes time, as has been articulated by many pantry leaders across the county, so training practices and materials should evolve as time goes on.

Pantry coordinators should feel empowered to assess the suitability of volunteers for neighbor-facing roles within food pantries and to re-assign volunteers as appropriate. It is possible that some volunteers will welcome a change in roles to be non-neighbor facing, as negative interactions can be stressful for both parties.

**Section 2 Finding 9: Extended wait times and long lines to receive food are a major problem across the Lebanon County charitable food system and affect visitors at different pantry locations. These long wait times are often worsened by lines forming outdoors. Poor weather conditions can be dangerous for pantry visitors and can dissuade people from utilizing a food pantry on any given day.**

Around 30% of pantry visitors report waiting longer than 30 minutes to receive food, while at two pantry locations, over a third report waiting longer than an hour for food. Because food quality and quantity changes from the start to the end of distributions at some pantries, many neighbors arrived several hours beforehand to ensure they could access the full variety of food available at the beginning of the distribution.

**Number of Minutes to Receive Food Services after Arriving at the Pantry**



The neighbor experience begins when a person arrives at a pantry location, so the waiting experience should be taken as seriously as the quality of food offerings.

Long lines and differential food quality and quantity at different points in a pantry distribution can exacerbate feelings of scarcity and create a more unwelcoming environment where conflict is more likely to occur, both between neighbors and with neighbors and pantry workers.

**Recommendation: Pantries should experiment with several ways to shorten lines and wait times for pantry visitors and should allow pantry visitors who are waiting, to wait inside, especially during days with poor weather conditions. One of the most impactful options to reduce wait times and long lines is to ensure that food quality and quantity is the same from the start of a distribution to the end of a distribution.**

Once pantry offerings are consistent across the food distribution, pantries should advertise that fact, but must recognize that it will take time and experience to increase trust on this front, especially if there have been significant differences in the past.

Appointments could be a useful tool for reducing wait times and long lines. While the flexibility of not requiring a pantry appointment in all cases is important, particularly for people without access to reliable transportation, pantries in other counties have utilized appointments as a means of ensuring that people can arrive and leave within a more condensed timeframe.

For pantries operating from buildings with multipurpose spaces available, a shift to creating indoor space as a waiting area will provide protection from the elements. This is an immediate opportunity to demonstrate care and concern for neighbors and improve the neighbor experience.

**Section 2 Finding 10: Pantry constraints related to funding, sourcing, and volunteer capacity limit partners’ ability to carry out services to their full potential.**

These constraints lead partners to make difficult decisions regarding the quantity and quality of foods they order and can provide. Limited volunteer capacity can disrupt the flow of services during distribution, put strain on existing volunteers, and restrict pick-up opportunities for retail donations.

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should further invest in the capacity of pantries to guarantee that all organizations are consistently meeting the community’s needs. Pantries should also connect with nearby churches and community organizations to recruit volunteers.** Some neighbors have shown interest in volunteering at the pantries they visit. Pantries should consider having neighbors volunteer, but only if they express interest is unprompted by pantry staff.

**Section 2 Finding 11: The hours of operation of food pantries in Lebanon County are generally well-distributed and accessible, with 98% of the population having access to an evening distribution and 65% with access to a weekend distribution.**

One in ten pantry visitors in Lebanon City report that only weekends work the best for them, and among food insecure non-food pantry survey respondents, 11% reported that existing hours of operation were a barrier to accessing food pantries.

**Recommendation: There is an opportunity to increase weekend access to pantries in Lebanon County, and in Lebanon City, which has no pantries with weekend hours.**

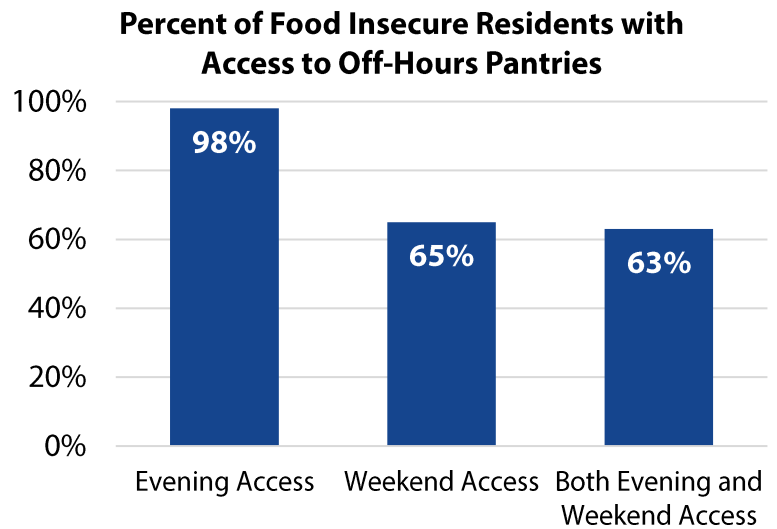
Stakeholders in Lebanon City should evaluate existing weekend resources, even if they are informal, to further consider whether more could be done to increase weekend food access. No food pantry can be everything for everyone, but strategies such as pop-up distributions or expanding hours in the city on weekends could increase access for people who work during the week or have other evening obligations that make it difficult to visit food pantries in non-weekend hours.

**Section 2 Finding 12: The most important finding from short surveys conducted at non-food pantry locations across Lebanon County is that 33% of food insecure individuals who do not visit a food pantry currently report that they do not know where to find a food pantry.**

This represents a significant opportunity to increase awareness of food pantry offerings to food insecure Lebanon County residents not utilizing the charitable food system.

**Recommendation: Food pantries and other stakeholders should work to advertise food pantry offerings and their criteria at key locations across Lebanon County.**

This could include public libraries, schools, other social service providers, at healthcare service locations, and in government offices among other potential locations.



### Section 3: Utilization of Key Government Programs in Lebanon County

The charitable food network in Lebanon County has the potential to build connections with neighbors and provide information about additional services in the community. Pantries that partner with health organizations for outreach report increased trust in these organizations from pantry visitors and staff,<sup>12</sup> which may increase positive health outcomes in underserved communities.

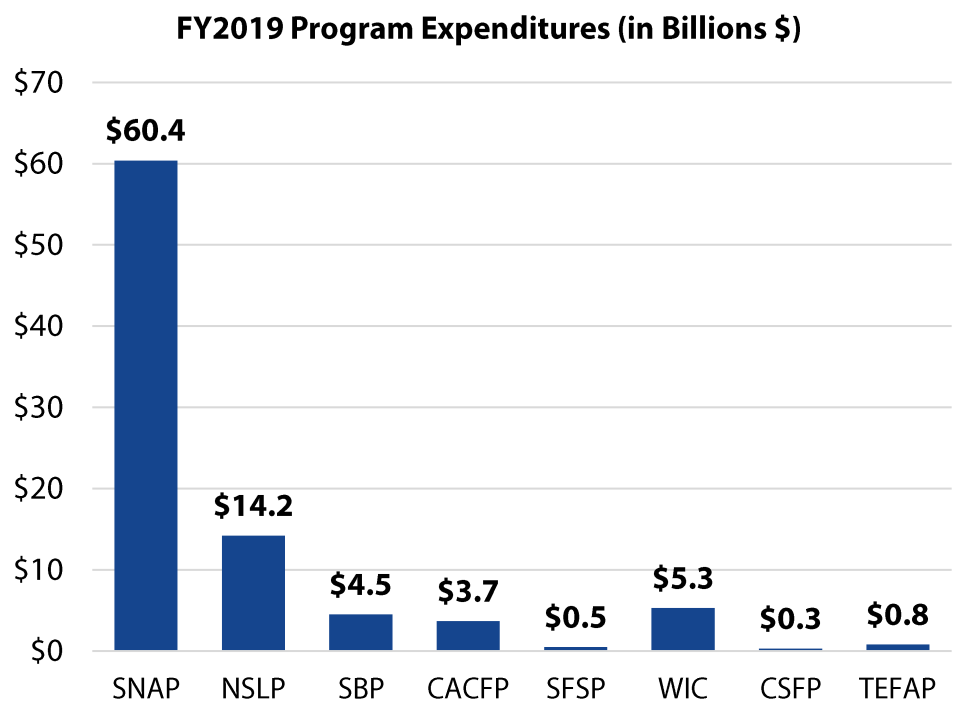
Government programs are perceived by pantry visitors as difficult to navigate.<sup>13</sup> Paperwork takes time and necessary documentation may be difficult to obtain. Eligibility requirements and income thresholds are not well understood, leading some eligible families to miss out on benefits they are entitled to receive.

The charitable food system is just one part of the equation to reducing food insecurity in Lebanon County. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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).

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 below. SNAP dwarfs all other programs, making it the most important food security support in the nation.

Therefore, 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 the food pantry visitor population, as these individuals are among the most likely in the county to face food insecurity. This report provides a deep dive into the state of participation for these key government programs in Lebanon County and provides recommendations on specific areas for focused geographic programmatic outreach.

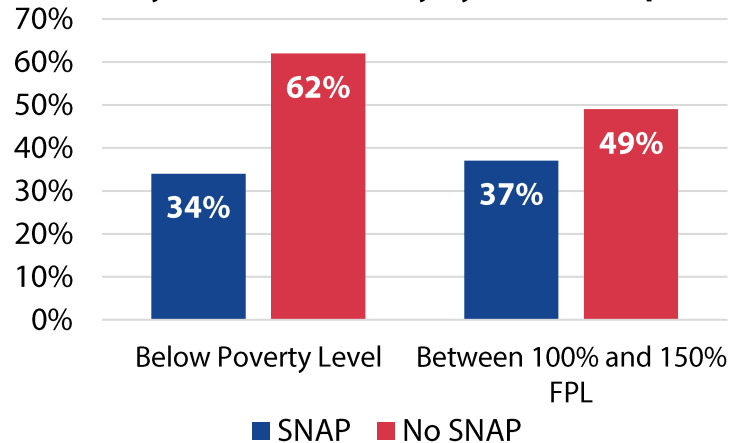


## SNAP Participation

SNAP is by far the largest and most important nutrition assistance program in the United States. SNAP is four times larger than NSLP, 12 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.

Research has shown SNAP effectively reduces very low food insecurity,<sup>16</sup> which is corroborated by the findings from neighbor surveys conducted at pantries in Lebanon County. Survey results show that for households below the poverty level, very low food security is 82% higher in households who do not receive SNAP than households who do (62% compared to 34%). For households with incomes between 100% and 150% of the federal poverty level, very low food security is 31% higher among households who do not receive SNAP compared to households who do (49% to 37%).

**Very Low Food Security by SNAP Receipt**



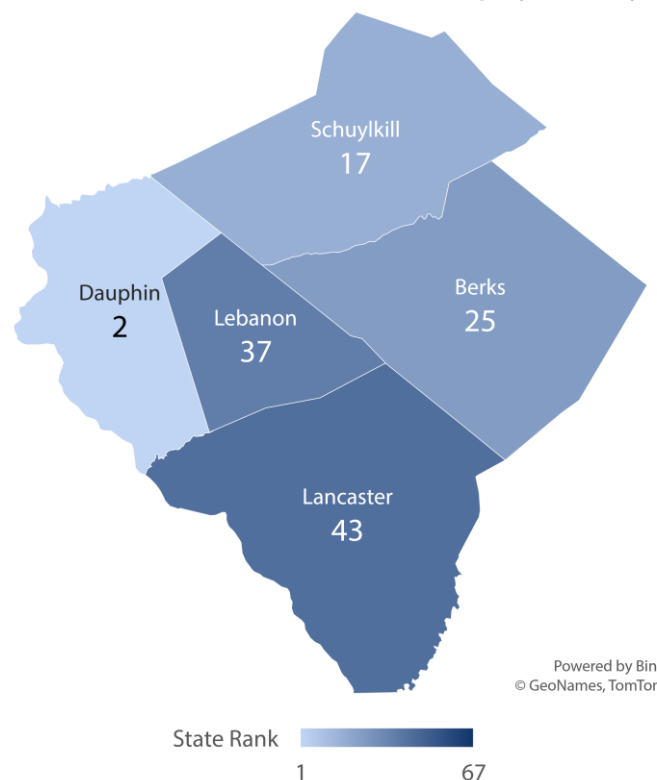
In Lebanon County, 18,650 individuals, or 13.0% of the total population, participated in SNAP as of August 2023. SNAP participation is now at record highs in Lebanon County, above both Great Recession and the initial COVID peak in terms of number of participating individuals, although the participation rate is currently slightly lower than the Great Recession peak of 13.2% of the population due to population growth. SNAP participation in Lebanon County increased dramatically during the Great Recession and fell slightly in the long recovery but has remained elevated due both to increased need and to program changes that expanded eligibility and made it easier to apply.

Pennsylvania is one of the highest performing states in terms of SNAP participation rates, outperforming 42 other states according to a recent USDA report.<sup>17</sup>

**However, Lebanon County underperforms most surrounding counties and the rest of the state in SNAP Participation.**

Lebanon County's SNAP participation rate is in the bottom half of the state – ranked 37<sup>th</sup> out of 67 counties in Pennsylvania and is lower than Dauphin, Schuylkill, and Berks counties, while higher than Lancaster County. Lancaster and Lebanon have overall family SNAP participation rates between 70% to 80%, while Berks and Schuylkill have rates between 80% and 90%, and Dauphin County has SNAP participation rates over 90%.

**SNAP Participation State Ranking by County**



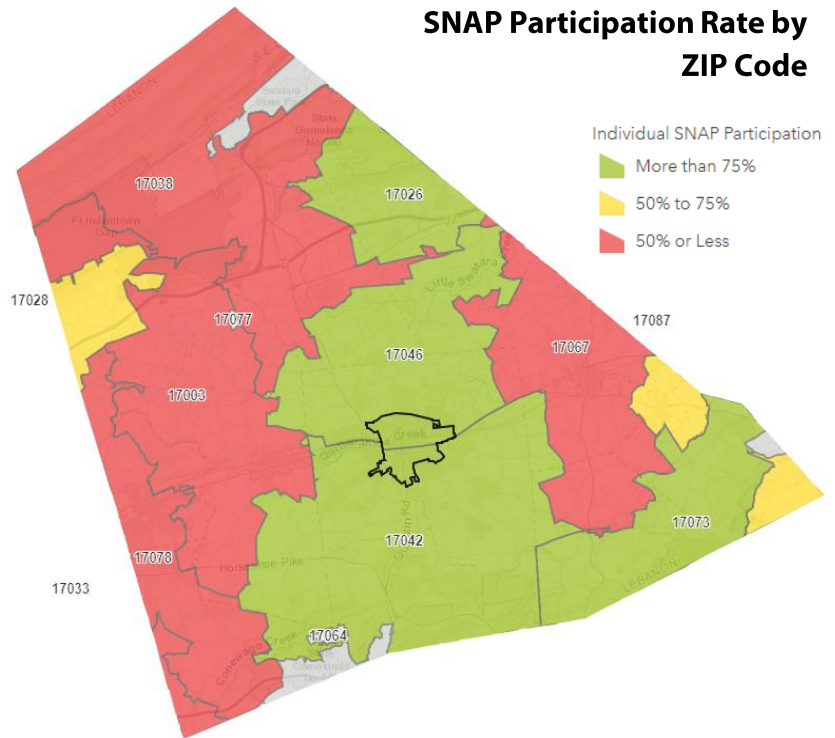


**ZIP Code SNAP Participation Analysis**  
 Using Pennsylvania DHS data only available at the ZIP Code level, this analysis finds that ZCTAs in the northern and western portions of the county have the lowest SNAP participation rates. ZIP Code 17078 in Palmyra has the largest SNAP participation gap of all ZCTAs in the county, with over 1,500 individuals likely eligible for but not participating in SNAP.

This is corroborated by the family SNAP participation gap calculations, which find that 17078 is second only to 17067 in family SNAP participation gaps. ZIP Codes 17067 and 17078 are among the top five highest participation gaps in both measures. The large SNAP participation gaps and low SNAP participation rates indicate that geographic-based outreach (through geo-targeted advertisements, in-person advertising events, pantry referrals, or other methods) would yield the most return on investment in these areas.

The ZCTAs that cover Lebanon City, 17042 and 17046, both have high SNAP participation rates. Since they are the largest ZIP Codes in the county by population by more than 10,000 individuals, they have some of the highest individual participation gaps, trailing only 17078 in Palmyra and 17033 in Hershey. ZIP Code 17033 is mostly in Dauphin County, with the exception of a portion in South Londonderry Township.

**SNAP Participation Rate by ZIP Code**

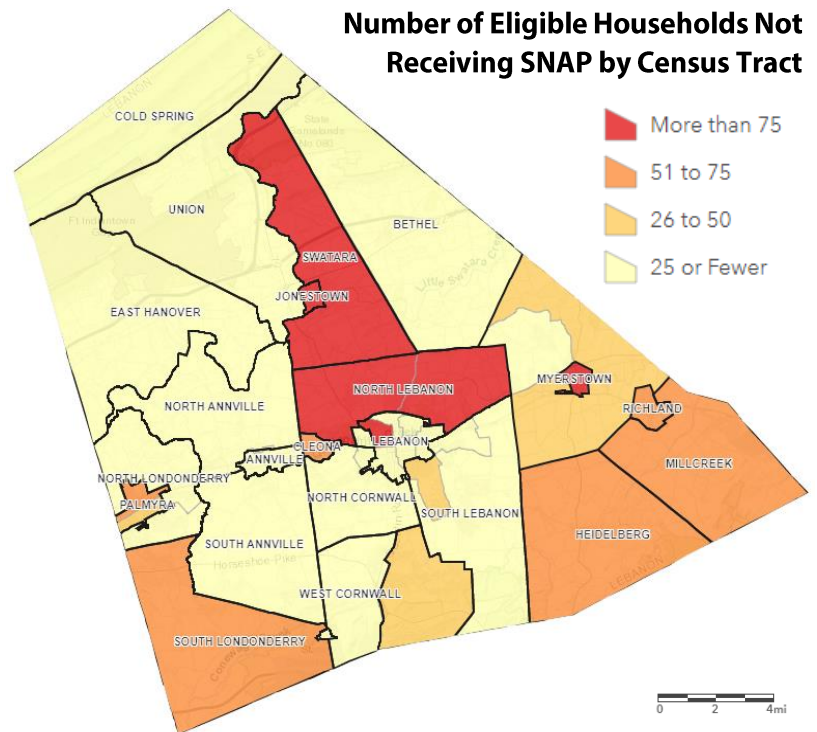


**Census Tract Analysis**

Analysis at the census tract level using family SNAP participation gap data from the ACS (because Pennsylvania DHS data is not available for census tracts) corroborates the findings at the ZIP Code level. The census tract level analysis provides further granularity for where geographic based SNAP outreach would be most impactful.

North Lebanon Township, Swatara Township/Jonestown, Myerstown, and northwest Lebanon City have the highest family SNAP participation gaps. Heidelberg and Millcreek Townships and Richland borough also have relatively large participation gaps, but these may be in part due to the Amish population in the part of the county around the Myerstown area, which is currently around 1,400 people according to the most recent Elizabethtown College estimates.<sup>18</sup>

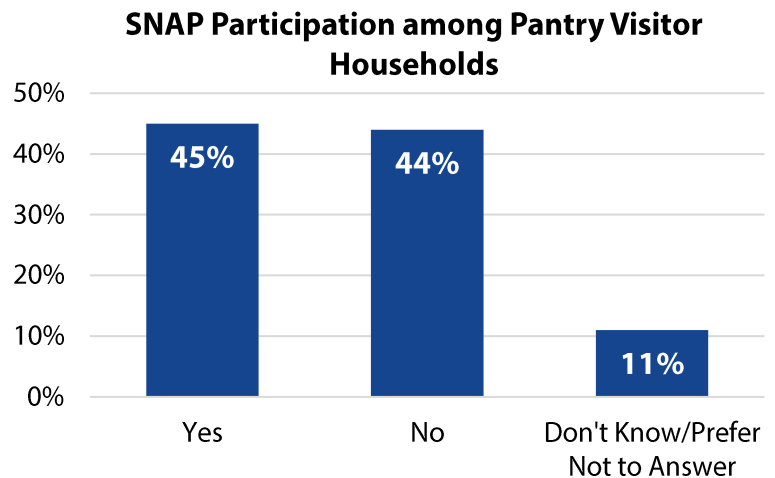
**Number of Eligible Households Not Receiving SNAP by Census Tract**



This analysis shows that in ZIP Code 17078, which has the largest individual participation gap in the entire county, the main sources of the large participation gaps include Palmyra and South Londonderry Township. While these two SNAP participation gap calculations (individual and family level) are both estimates, they provide strategic insight into where the greatest opportunities for SNAP outreach lie, and their consistency across methods and geographies increases confidence in the results.

### SNAP Participation at Food Pantries Across Lebanon County

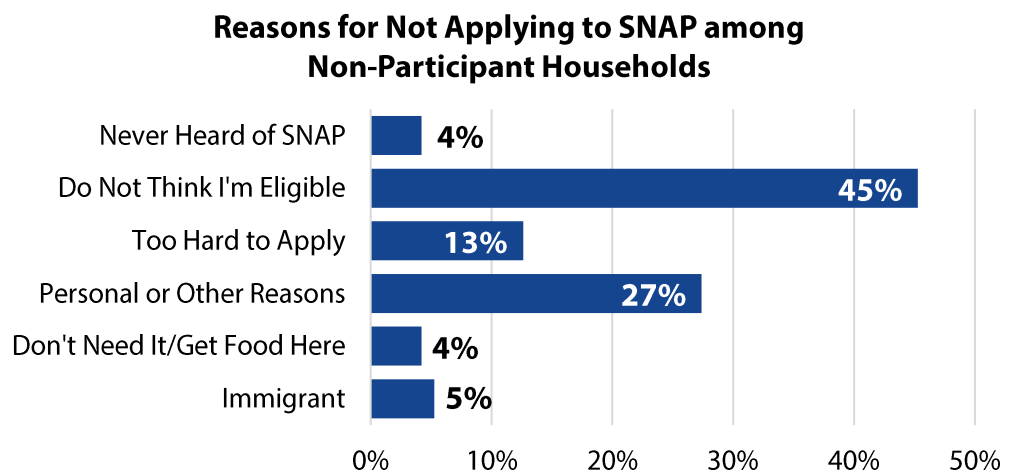
Surveys at five food pantries across Lebanon County show that SNAP participation is low even among people who receive support from the charitable food network. SNAP participation among pantry visitors is 45% on average, with a median participation rate of 42%. This finding from survey data is corroborated by data from pantries utilizing Service Insights on MealConnect (an electronic neighbor intake tool) in Lebanon County, where SNAP participation measures are within three percentage points of the survey results.



### Reasons for Not Participating in SNAP

Of the households who do not participate in SNAP, 50% reported that they have never previously applied for SNAP. A total of 44% of respondents reported not applying for SNAP because they did not think they were eligible. An additional 11% said they believed it was too hard to apply, and 29% cited personal or other reasons. The most common reported other reasons were that they did not think that they needed it, they did not know how, or they were immigrants without citizenship documentation.

One household said that “there is no translator and it is too difficult” to apply for SNAP. Many statements made by neighbors regarding SNAP reflected incomplete or inaccurate information about the application and benefits process, and pantries with large distributions may have limited capacity to guide neighbors through the process.



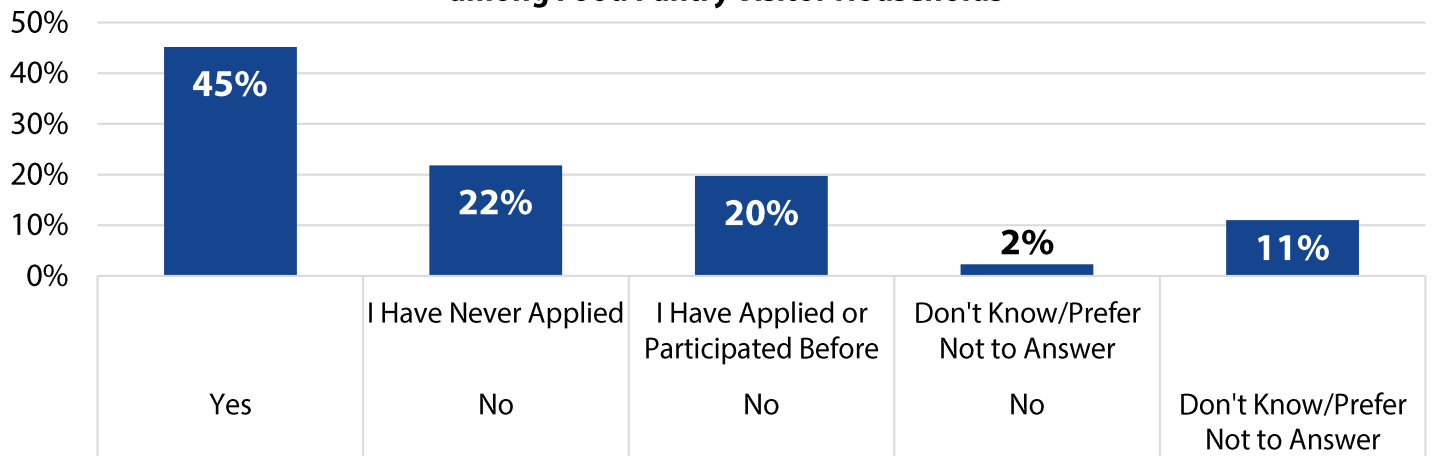
Of the respondents who currently do not receive SNAP but who had applied before, 48% reported that their SNAP benefits stopped because their income was too high, while six percent reported they did not know why or the reason was unclear. Another six percent reported their benefits were stopped because they did not meet work requirements.

As mentioned earlier, food pantries often help families fill in a gap when income and wages are not quite enough to meet all expenses, especially for families who do not qualify for government assistance due to their earnings. One neighbor reported she was “laughed at” for applying for SNAP and that she would “never” apply again as a result. She shared that upon visiting her community pantry, “they could not be more welcoming,” in contrast to her experience with SNAP.

### Outreach Implications and the Impact of SNAP Participation

Food pantry survey results show that a minimum 22% of food pantry visitors have never applied for SNAP, while an additional 20% have applied before but are not currently participating. Some pantry visitor households are likely ineligible for SNAP and 8% of all households reported that they applied previously but their income was too high. However, between 83% and 95% of food pantry visitors may qualify for SNAP based on their reported monthly income. Pantry surveys further demonstrate that a lack of information about or misconceptions around eligibility as well as confusion with application and recertification paperwork are major barriers to SNAP participation for many food pantry visitor households. Together, these results show there is significant opportunity to increase SNAP participation among the pantry visitor household population.

**SNAP Participation and Application History among Food Pantry Visitor Households**



It is critically important to note that participation in SNAP should never be a precondition for receiving charitable food and, conversely, participation in SNAP should not be a reason to limit the number of times people can visit a food pantry. Documentation for TEFAP pantry eligibility, especially from pantries utilizing SI-MC as an intake tool, does not consider SNAP benefits to be “income,” and data collected about enrollment in these programs should only be used to provide feedback on additional services a household may be entitled to receive. Survey and focus group participants in Lebanon County reported pantry knowledge of the benefits they receive, especially SNAP, has led to volunteers or staff making negative comments during pantry visits. These interactions are stigmatizing for neighbors and damage the reputation of the charitable food network as a low-barrier opportunity for households in need of assistance.

### Impact of SNAP Participation on Very Low Food Security Status of Pantry Visitors

Pantry visitor households who participate in SNAP are much less likely to experience very low food security than pantry visitors who do not participate in SNAP, even when holding income threshold and frequency of visits to food pantries in the last year constant.

The positive impact of SNAP participation on very low food security status is particularly large for households with incomes below the poverty level. Food pantry visitors who are SNAP participants and have incomes below the poverty level face food insecurity at a 34% rate, compared to 62% of households in this income range who do not participate in SNAP. This 28 percentage-point difference equates to a 45% reduction in very low food security.

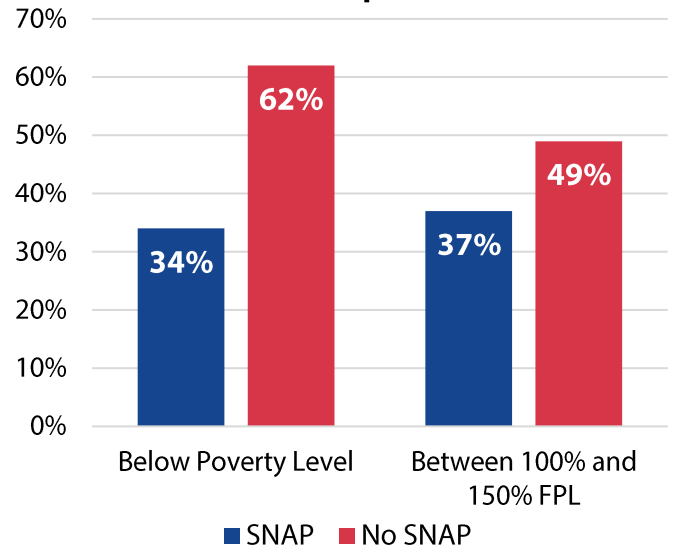
The large effect SNAP participation has on food security for very low-income households likely results from the fact that these households are eligible for the largest amount of monthly SNAP benefits relative to other households. Furthermore, because these households have monthly incomes below the poverty level, they are very likely to be eligible for SNAP benefits through both the gross and net income eligibility tests. This can make targeted SNAP outreach for this subgroup of individuals a worthwhile investment. It is also important to note that SNAP participation and the frequency of food pantry utilization have a compounding impact. SNAP participation in combination with more frequently visiting a food pantry reduces experiences of very low food security across all income categories.

### Impact of the End of the SNAP Emergency Allotments

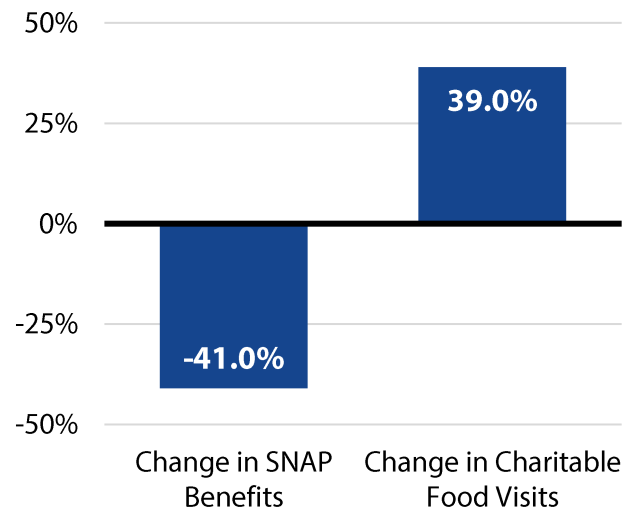
Part of the federal government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 was a program flexibility for SNAP called SNAP Emergency Allotments that allowed SNAP participants to receive the maximum benefit amount for their household size, regardless of the regular payment amount for which they qualified. Participant households who already qualified for the maximum payment received an extra \$95. March 2023 was the first month without Emergency Allotments, resulting in an average drop in SNAP benefits of \$108 per person per month in Lebanon County from February to June 2023.

This 41% drop in SNAP benefits resulted in an immediate 19% increase in demand for charitable food in Lebanon County, and a 39% increase in household-level demand for charitable food between February and June 2023. The drop in SNAP assistance and the corresponding immediate rise in demand for charitable food assistance demonstrates how closely tied the charitable food network is with SNAP. People are trying to put together resources to have enough to eat, so when SNAP benefits fall, utilization of the charitable food system increases. The presence of the charitable food system may also make participation in SNAP less pressing, even for households who qualify for only the minimum benefit.

### Very Low Food Security by SNAP Receipt



### Percent Change in SNAP Benefits and Household-Level Charitable Food Visits (Feb. to June 2023)



The end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments, which lowered the average per person SNAP benefit in Lebanon County to just \$158 in August 2023 from \$265 in February 2023 (a 41% drop) could indicate that it would be less worthwhile for households to apply for SNAP since they qualify for a smaller benefit in the past. However, that has not been the case. Lebanon County has seen a 3.4% increase in SNAP participation between February and August 2023. Lebanon's recent increase in SNAP participation despite the dramatic drop in average SNAP benefits is a stark contrast to the change in participation during the same timeframe in between February and August 2022, in which SNAP participation fell by 1.3%.

### 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 much more complex than SNAP.

The WIC program provides participants with access to specific nutritious foods considered to be lacking in their diets. Health professionals match participants with one of seven food packages based on comprehensive nutrition and screening assessments, which determine the types of foods participants can redeem using their WIC benefits. Food packages indicate the maximum allowable amount of food a participant can purchase each month based on their status (e.g., pregnant, partially breastfeeding, fully breastfeeding, or postpartum) and need. These food packages may limit individuals' ability to acquire foods they need or want.

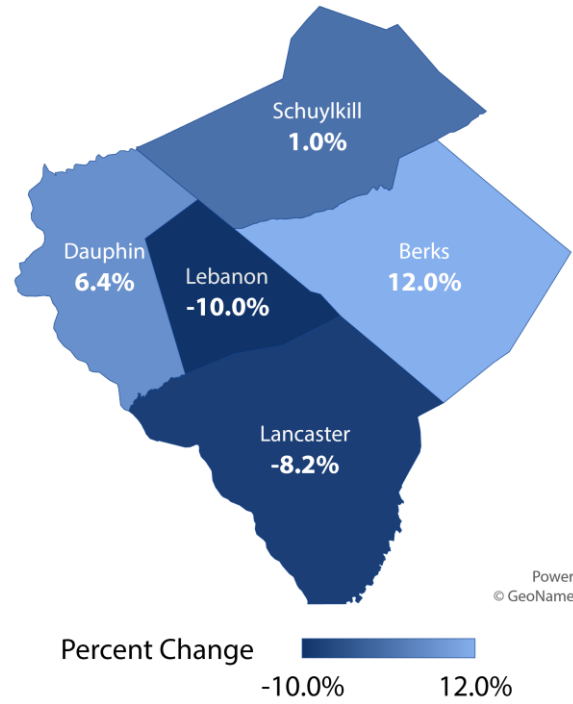
According to the Pennsylvania WIC webpage, the average value of a monthly WIC food package is \$65 for adults, \$105 for infants, and \$50 for children; participants can only purchase food with their WIC benefits from stores that accept WIC Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Cards. Unlike SNAP benefits, WIC benefits do not carry over into following months if they are not spent, meaning that participants must use all their benefits by midnight on the last day of each month before their balances reset. Because of this administrative requirement, there is an additional gap between the number of participants and the number that use their full benefits.

Finally, 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 that still utilizes an offline EBT system.<sup>19</sup> These frequent county office visits may cause disruptions in participants' lives that can deter them from continuing to participate in the program.<sup>20</sup>



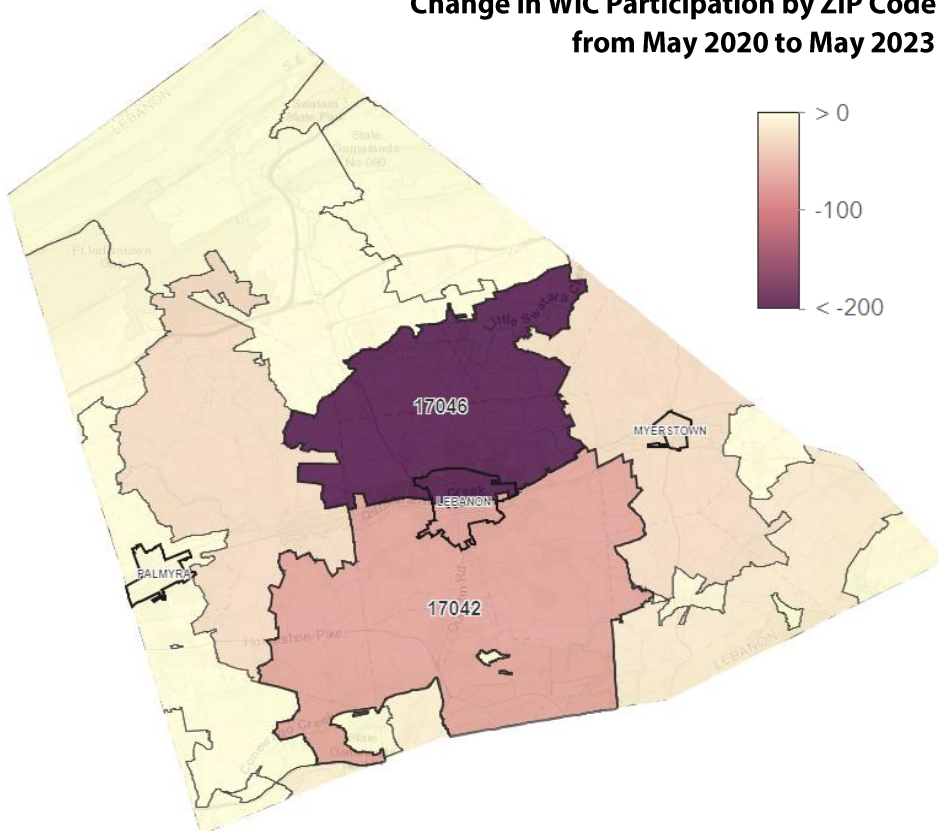
The extra administrative burden placed on WIC participants by in-person benefits recharging has led to a further divergence in participation for Pennsylvania and the other offline EBT states compared to the rest of the country since the COVID-19 pandemic. Lebanon County has been acutely affected by this drop in WIC participation, with a 10.0% drop in WIC participation since December 2020, a drop of 248 individuals from 2,471 to 2,223 today. Lebanon County's drop in participation is larger than all surrounding counties, and while most counties experienced significant declines in WIC participation between December 2020 and December 2022, most counties and the state have fully recovered participation in 2023. WIC participation in the state is up 1.9% since December 2020. Despite the large drop in participation since December 2020, WIC participation in Lebanon County has recovered over the first eight months of 2023, up 12% from December 2022 to August 2023, although still below December 2020 levels.

**Percent Change in WIC Participation since December 2020**



The decrease in WIC participation has not been experienced evenly across the county. ZIP Codes 17046 and 17042 have seen the largest drops in WIC participation, with a drop of more than 250 between May 2020 and May 2023 in 17046, and a drop of over 150 in 17042. Therefore, WIC outreach will likely have the greatest impact focusing on these two ZCTAs, since they had higher participation pre-pandemic but have seen that participation fall significantly.

**Change in WIC Participation by ZIP Code from May 2020 to May 2023**



Census tract level analysis of the number of children under 6 who qualify for WIC reveals that the western and center portions of Lebanon City likely have the largest drops in WIC participation at a census tract level. Detailed census tract level eligibility estimates are available in the Lebanon County Hunger Mapping interim report, published in January 2023.

## Child Nutrition Programs

### Federally Funded 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 programs for which school food authorities (SFAs) are intended to be the primary sponsor, including NSLP, SBP, and SFSP.

### The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Lebanon County public schools were identified as targets for child nutrition program participation outreach if more than 25% of school-aged children (between age 6 and age 17) living in the school district lived in households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty line and if building-level participation rates for lunch and breakfast in October 2022 were below the statewide average participation rates among traditional public schools of 56.0% and 53.2% respectively.

It is important to note that the approximately 53% participation rate for breakfast means that just over half of children *who ate lunch* also ate breakfast, not that half of enrolled children ate breakfast. A list of schools meeting all the above criteria can be found in the table below, in order by highest proportion of children living under 185% FPL at the district level.

School District	District School Age Population (2021 ACS)	District School Age Population Under 185% FPL (2021 ACS)	Percent School Age Population Under 185% FPL (2021 ACS)	School Name	Total Enrollment	Total Free/Reduced Eligible	Breakfast Participation Rate (Breakfasts Served/Lunches Served)	Estimated Lunch Participation Rate (Avg. Daily Lunches/Enrollment)
Palmyra Area	4,022	1,408	35.0%	Forge Road ES	368	111	31.0%	49.9%
				Lingle Avenue ES	622	174	35.2%	35.3%
				Northside ES	258	100	36.8%	49.0%
				Palmyra Area SHS	1,227	317	35.8%	38.1%
				Pine Street ES	387	124	33.5%	52.3%
Northern Lebanon	2,569	885	34.5%	Northern Lebanon SHS	708	251	20.4%	42.4%
Cornwall-Lebanon	5,774	1,834	31.8%	Cedar Crest HS	1,771	674	52.3%	40.8%
				Cornwall ES	565	183	23.7%	45.4%

In addition, although it has been excluded from the target school analysis, Lebanon County CTC did not participate in SBP in 2022 despite participating in NSLP and therefore should be considered a target school. The technical appendix of the report contains a table that includes meal participation rates for all of Lebanon County's public schools.

In the fall of 2022, as school operations began to normalize after nearly two years of pandemic response, the Wolf administration started a new initiative to provide universal free breakfast to public school students in Pennsylvania. This initiative provided breakfasts for free to all students at SPB-participant schools, regardless of income and without any application requirements.

The impact of this initiative on participation was tremendous. As shown in the chart at right, breakfast participation at Lebanon County’s traditional public schools jumped to 43% in 2022, while lunch participation remained flat from 2019. This stark divergence between breakfast and lunch participation rates is compelling evidence of the effectiveness of universal programs to increase program uptake.

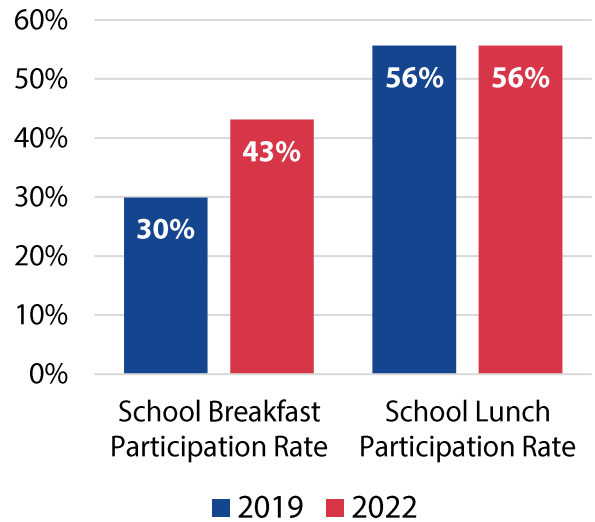
### Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Location Analysis

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. Both school districts and community organizations may sponsor SFSP sites and school districts can also take advantage of the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) to provide year-round meal service with a minimum of administrative barriers. The experience for children receiving meals at SFSP or SSO sites is similar, so in the below analysis, SFSP or “summer feeding” will be used to refer to both programs.

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. Sites become individually eligible if they are close enough to an individual school building that would qualify for the program or if a sponsor can prove that 50% or more of participating children who attend a site meet the income thresholds, though this last option often requires the collection of individual income eligibility applications and can create significant administrative burden. More information about site eligibility is available from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

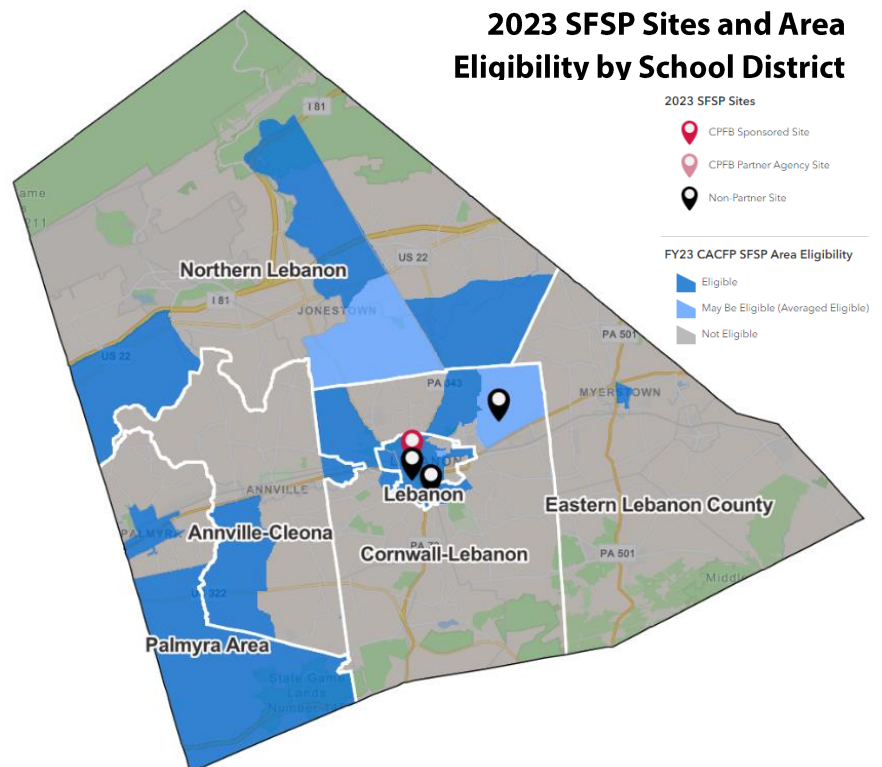
In 2023, Lebanon County had just four summer meal sites. The sites were concentrated in a small area in Lebanon County. Three sites were located in Lebanon School District and one was located in Cornwall-Lebanon School District.

**Meal Participation Rates in Lebanon County Public Schools**



■ 2019 ■ 2022

**2023 SFSP Sites and Area Eligibility by School District**



There were four sponsors in Lebanon County in 2023; each sponsored one site. The sponsoring organizations were the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, Cornwall-Lebanon School District, Lebanon School District, and Lebanon County Commission on Drug & Alcohol Abuse. Three of four sponsors operated their sites under SFSP; Lebanon School District operated SSO. All sites began operating in June and ended in late July or early August, for an average length of operation of just under seven weeks. One site served lunch only, two sites served both breakfast and lunch, and one site served breakfast and morning snack.

Population density and transportation access are two valuable considerations when assessing where SFSP sites might be most successful, as the primary program design requires that children eat meals on-site in a congregate setting, which means that transportation to and from the site is a prohibitive barrier in areas that are rural or otherwise not walkable. Good candidate locations for new traditional SFSP sites in Lebanon County may be within Lebanon City and Palmyra and Myerstown boroughs, as they all contain eligible census tracts and likely have the density and infrastructure necessary for children to visit the sites easily.

Additionally, 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 rule in place allowing for non-congregate sites in rural areas, but it is only applicable in a relatively narrow set of circumstances. The only eligible school district for rural non-congregate sites in Lebanon County is Northern Lebanon School District, which contains several eligible census tracts.

#### Privately Funded Summer Food Programs for Children

As discussed in the previous section, not every area is eligible for SFSP, and an on-site meal program might not be the right fit for every community, even if it is eligible. SFSP is an important program and a valuable resource, but it is not and should not be the only means of ensuring children receive the nutrition they need outside of the school year.

Indeed, in Lebanon County, there are several organizations offering summer food for kids outside of the structure of SFSP. One pantry partner in Palmyra offers summer lunch boxes in addition to pantry distributions for households with children who reside in Palmyra Area and Annville-Cleona School Districts,<sup>21</sup> and Lebanon County's largest youth programs-only agency offers family meal kits both during the school year and in the summer. This agency covers five of the six school districts in Lebanon County (all except Palmyra Area),<sup>22</sup> so between these two agencies, every child in the county has access to some sort of summer food program above and beyond a standard pantry distribution, even in areas that lack SFSP sites and/or eligibility.

Additionally, there may be programs external to the charitable food network, such as summer camps, that offer meals as part of their programming. While food service is not the primary goal of programs like these, they can still act as important supports for kids in need.

## Recommendations on the Utilization of Government Programs

**Section 3 Finding 1: Just 45% of food pantry visitors participate in SNAP, and Lebanon County generally underperforms in SNAP participation compared to the rest of the state, with large geographic participation gaps in North Lebanon Township, northwest Lebanon City, Myerstown, and the Palmyra area.**

SNAP is by far the largest food security social safety net program in the United States, providing nine meals for every meal provided by the charitable food system, making it exceedingly important to ensure that Lebanon County and its residents do not leave these critical federal funds unused.

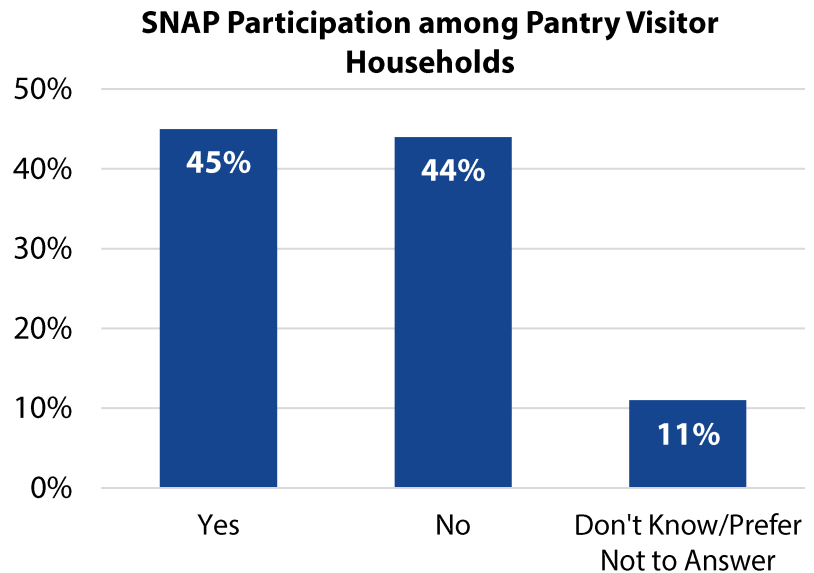
Approximately 85% to 95% of food pantry visitors may be eligible for SNAP based on their reported monthly incomes, leaving significant room for improvement in utilization rates at the food pantry level.

**Recommendation: County stakeholders should establish strong relationships between healthcare organizations, the county assistance office, other community social service providers, and the public to provide clear directions and robust assistance regarding SNAP eligibility and application processes.**

Food pantries can be a well-targeted location for specific SNAP outreach efforts given the relatively low participation rates and likely high eligibility. Food pantries should partner with outside entities to conduct this SNAP outreach, as some food pantry visitors expressed that in the past, they have been told they should not be visiting the pantry if they receive SNAP. Therefore, another voice and organization may be best suited to conduct these outreach activities onsite. Pantries should work to make clear that participating in SNAP will in no way impact people’s eligibility for receiving pantry services.

SNAP utilization rates have improved in the county in the last year, up 3.6% in 2023 alone near a record 13.0% of the Lebanon County population (18,650 individuals). This rise in SNAP participation occurred despite a fall in average SNAP benefits, which is an encouraging sign for future SNAP outreach efforts. Lebanon County stakeholders should continue to build on this recent improvement to advance SNAP participation rates even further.

**Section 3 Finding 2: Participation in SNAP reduces experiences of very low food security among food pantry visitors in Lebanon County substantially. Very low food security rates are 45% lower for pantry visitors with incomes below the poverty level who participate in SNAP than for pantry visitors below the poverty level who do not participate in SNAP (34% compared to 62%).**

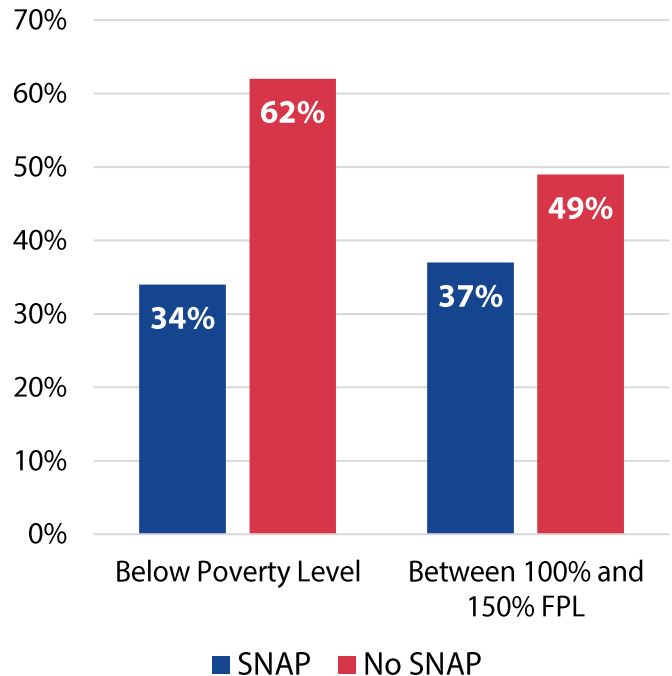




SNAP has been proven to improve food security at a national level, but this data shows that it has a major impact on very low food security status among pantry visitors when holding both income and frequency of food pantry visits constant.

SNAP participation and the frequency of pantry utilization have a compounding impact on very low food security status, as pantry visitors with incomes below the poverty level who do not receive SNAP and who visited a food pantry 12 times or fewer during the last year have the highest very low food security rates. Neighbors meeting these criteria are 15 percentage points more likely to report going hungry because there was not enough money for food than any other group who participate in SNAP or who visited pantries more than 12 times in the last year. This further demonstrates the significant connection between SNAP and pantry utilization in impacting food security status.

**Very Low Food Security by SNAP Receipt**



**Recommendation: Prioritizing promotion of SNAP in Lebanon County at the non-profit and governmental level will have a significant impact on reducing very low food security in the county, especially among people who visit food pantries.**

**Section 3 Finding 3: The main reasons individuals report not applying for or participating in SNAP are that they do not think they are eligible, it is too hard to apply, or personal reasons. Over half of food pantry visitors who are not participating in SNAP have never applied before.**

This equates to one-fifth of pantry visitors (22%) who have never applied for SNAP. Another fifth of food pantry visitors (20%) are not currently participating but have reported having applied or participated before. The main other reasons people report not applying for SNAP is that they do not need it, they did not know how, or they were immigrants without citizenship.

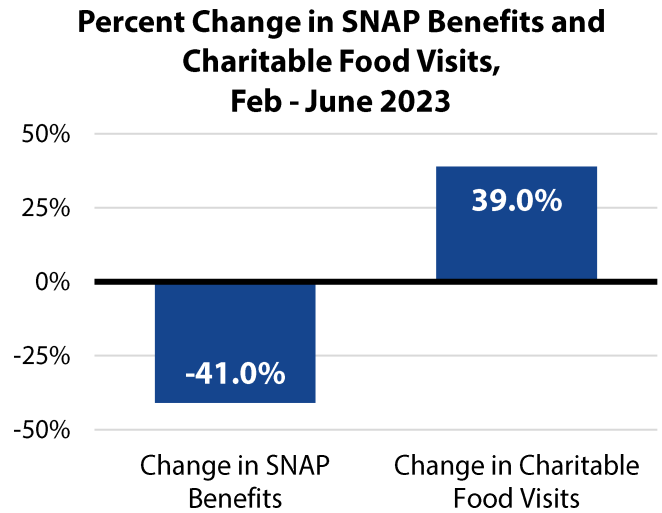
**Recommendation: Community institutions and food pantries should collaborate to increase availability of SNAP eligibility criteria and address potential misconceptions about SNAP.**

The large proportion of likely-eligible food pantry visitors (22% of all pantry visitors) who have never applied for SNAP before represents a significant opportunity to increase SNAP participation in the county.

Neighbors have legitimate concerns about how participating in SNAP may impact them, so these need to be addressed thoroughly in both written materials and in conversations with trusted community partners. Many statements that neighbors made about SNAP reflected information that was incomplete or inaccurate about the application and benefits process, indicating significant opportunity for trusted entities in the county, such as healthcare organizations, to clear up confusion regarding SNAP eligibility.

**Section 3 Finding 4: Average SNAP benefits in Lebanon County fell by 41% (\$108 per person per month) between February and June 2023 due to the end of a COVID-19 pandemic SNAP program flexibility known as SNAP Emergency Allotments. This dramatic drop in average SNAP benefits corresponded with a similarly large 39% increase in food pantry visits during the same period.**

Food pantries in Lebanon County report difficulty keeping up with the increase in demand for charitable food services since the end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments. The drop in SNAP benefits equates to a \$1.9 million per month loss in benefits in Lebanon County that is difficult for the charitable food system alone to replace. Lebanon County experienced a \$15 greater loss per person per month in SNAP benefits than the statewide average (\$108 vs \$93.)



**Recommendation: State, federal, and local policymakers, as well as the public, should work to increase support to the charitable food system in the face of increased need for its services. In the long term, policymakers should also invest further in SNAP as it has been proven to combat food insecurity at scale.**

SNAP and the charitable food system are intricately connected, as people work to put together sufficient resources to make ends meet on any given month. The loss in SNAP benefits means that people in Lebanon County will face increasingly difficult choices between food and other necessities such as utilities, rent/mortgage, and medical care.

**Section 3 Finding 5: WIC participation is down 10% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with most of the losses concentrated in ZIP Code 17046, particularly in the northern part of Lebanon City.**

Stakeholders in Lebanon County have been innovative in addressing the issue with targeted outreach and a mobile WIC clinic. These efforts have resulted in some significant recent gains in WIC participation across the county, but participation still has not yet fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

ZIP Codes 17046 and 17042 have seen the largest drops in WIC participation, with a drop of more than 250 and 150 participants between May 2020 and May 2023, respectively. Census tract level analysis reveals that the western and northern neighborhoods in Lebanon City have the most WIC eligible children under six.

**Recommendation: Geographically targeted WIC outreach in northern Lebanon City could be an effective way to increase WIC participation. Survey results further indicate that food pantries would be valuable places to do outreach.**

Unfortunately, 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 significant difficulties upfront in the outreach process, while also providing information about the very real benefits of the program for young children.

WIC participation rates among food pantry visitor households with children under six are 46% on average, with a median of 50% across pantry sites.

Interested stakeholders should work on state-level advocacy to help reduce these administrative burdens and bring them in line with other states in the near-term. Advocates should talk to federal legislators about the importance of making WIC more accessible to its well-targeted demographic.

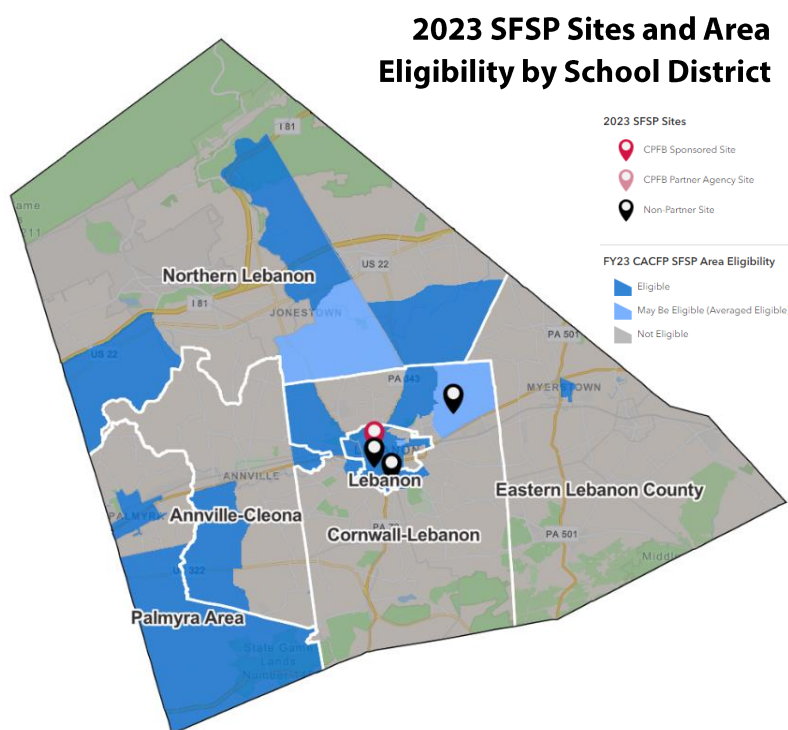
**Section 3 Finding 6: School meal participation is low across all school levels in the Palmyra area and in high-poverty secondary schools elsewhere in Lebanon County. Breakfast participation is significantly lower than that of lunch in public schools countywide, but the universal free school breakfast program that began in October 2022 had a huge impact – breakfast participation increased 43% countywide following the policy change while lunch participation remained flat.**

**Recommendation: All schools, but especially the target schools identified in the NSLP/SBP analysis of this report, should be encouraged to implement strategies to increase participation in school meal programs.**

There are several evidence-based alternative service models that can help increase participation in breakfast, including breakfast in the classroom for elementary schools and grab-and-go or second-chance breakfast in secondary schools.<sup>23</sup>

**Section 3 Finding 7: Federally funded summer meal sites for children are currently not available in most of Lebanon County, including densely populated eligible areas such as Palmyra and Myerstown. However, privately funded summer meal or grocery programs reach every school district in the county.**

A new rural non-congregate SFSP rule may make it possible for Northern Lebanon School District to increase access to federally funded child meals in that area of the county, but this rule does not apply to any other district. Additionally, there are many food insecure children living in areas ineligible for SFSP or in communities where congregate meals are not an appropriate service model across the county.



**Recommendation: With the goal of ensuring that children and their families have access to the same amount and type of food during the summer as during the school year, the charitable food system should seek out potential SFSP sites or sponsors in the identified areas. Meanwhile, stakeholders must continue to invest in privately funded summer programs for children, especially in areas that are ineligible or otherwise not well-suited for SFSP.**

## Section 4: Intersecting and Upstream Issues

### Drivers of Food Insecurity

To better understand the root causes of food insecurity in Lebanon County, this section builds off the extensive secondary data analysis conducted in the Lebanon County Hunger Mapping Interim Report in combination with primary food pantry visitor survey data collected at pantries in Lebanon County.

Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition largely resulting from economic insecurity and the related factors of household income, employment status, disability status, and race or ethnicity.<sup>24,25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> Homeownership and housing insecurity are strong predictors of household food insecurity,<sup>27</sup> and these underlying factors vary dramatically by race/ethnicity in Lebanon County, contributing to divergent food insecurity rates by race/ethnicity.

These factors are largely systemic and structural rather than the result of an individual's decisions, but they are not always perceived as such, leading to even more challenging circumstances for food insecure neighbors:

*"I think a lot of people think that you get to be poor because you make bad choices. But sometimes you can't make better choices. Sometimes there are not good choices in a situation."* – Phone interview participant

Overall, this analysis finds that along with historic marginalization, there are three main upstream and intersecting factors contributing to food insecurity in Lebanon County: housing costs and evictions, financial exclusion, and low and irregular pay.

### Housing and Evictions

CPFBR researchers completed 436 one-on-one surveys with neighbors across the county. These interactions were usually brief, but at times neighbors shared important details and stories about their lives. Specific to the problem of housing precarity, neighbors revealed the stress of uncertain living arrangements. Many visitors to a pantry service offered on an emergency basis indicated they sought this assistance to set up a new household and described the chaos of living in "doubled-up" arrangements with family or friends. Other neighbors, relying on income from Social Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), or Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF or "cash assistance"), were consumed with worry about maintaining their current living arrangement. Above all, these neighbors spoke of their need to exercise control over their housing situation as critically important to the well-being of their family.

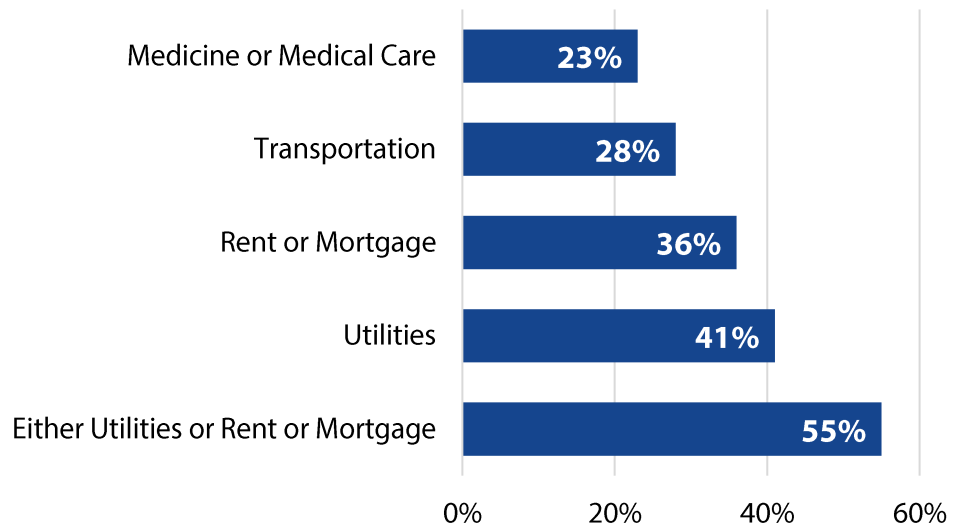
*"[The pantry] saved my life and provided opportunities. [It provides] opportunities for people who are now wearing three-piece suits who went from the gutter and to the food bank to where they are today."* – Focus group participant who shared they were formerly homeless.

When asked what would make the biggest difference right now:

*"A go-to place for the homeless community. And homelessness is huge here. It is huge. No one wants to say it, I think. Somewhere to go to do my laundry, somewhere to shower. I can go to the Y as long as I can afford that \$11.58. Somewhere to cook. At this point in my life, I am trying to think myself into a better way of living. I'm tired. You know the head is full."* – Focus group participant.

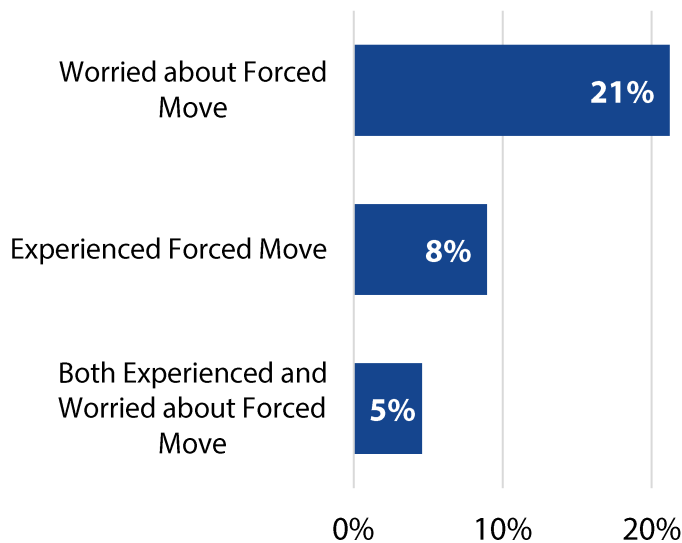
Housing and related expenses are the main economic tradeoffs with food made by households who visit food pantries. Fully 41% of households reported having to choose between paying for utilities and food, while 36% of households reported having to choose between paying the rent or mortgage and food. Combined, over 55% of households must choose between food and utilities or housing.

### Economic Tradeoffs with Food



Nearly a quarter of food pantry visitors have either experienced a forced move in the last year or are worried about being forced to move in the coming year. A total of 8% of pantry visitors have been forced to move (including evictions and foreclosures) and 21% are worried about being forced to move.

### Forced Moves Among Pantry Visitors



CPF’s analysis of high food insecurity rates, poverty status, and housing burden status in the Lebanon County Hunger Mapping Interim Report demonstrates the interconnectedness of these economic factors which can make it very difficult, if not impossible, for individuals and families to meet their nutritional needs without assistance from food programs and the charitable food network. Receipt of charitable food helps to relieve the cost burdens people face on other major expenses such as housing because people can allocate their resources accordingly. One survey respondent reported that “We always pay bills first, then get minimal food. Mainly because of programs like this one.”



## Financial System Access

Access to mainstream financial services is severely limited among food pantry visitors in Lebanon County. In Lebanon County, over 40% of pantry visitors are either unbanked or underbanked, with more than a quarter (27%) fully unbanked. These rates are more than ten times the statewide average of 2.6% of Pennsylvanians who are unbanked and nearly five times the national average of 4.5%. The underbanked rate of 14% of food pantry visitors matches the national average, making the main differentiator in financial access among food pantry individuals the rate of unbanked individuals.

Elevated rates of limited or no financial access in pantry visitors are a significant 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.<sup>28</sup> Without access to traditional banking, households are often forced to rely on costly alternative financial services, such as check-cashing and payday loans.

These services can take up a significant portion of low-income individuals' take-home pay, as unbanked households spend on average 5% of their income on fees for alternative financial services<sup>29</sup>.

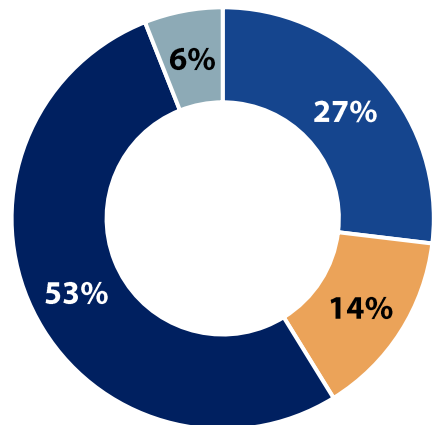
Financial health has a major impact on food insecurity across a variety of dimensions due to its impact on economic security. People without credit scores have difficulty obtaining applying for a loan, renting an apartment, or qualifying for other financial tools.<sup>30</sup> A food security assessment conducted in Alameda County, California found that the prevalence of subprime credit scores was strongly related to food insecurity at the ZIP Code level.<sup>31</sup> People with subprime credit and without access to mainstream financial markets pay more for goods and services than other households, making it more expensive to be poor.<sup>32</sup>

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 nine percent of households with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000; unbanked rates for all other income levels are just four percent.

There are significant differences in financial access rates by race and ethnicity, with Black and Hispanic households being far more likely to be unbanked than are Asian and white households. Unbanked rates for Black and Hispanic households are between nine and eleven percent while unbanked rates for Asian and white, non-Hispanic households are between two and three percent. Furthermore, 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.<sup>33, 34</sup>

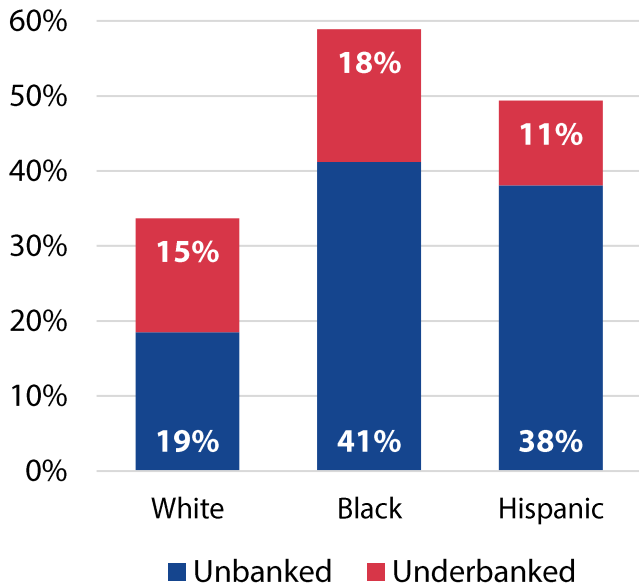
These patterns hold for the food pantry visitor population in Lebanon County, as there are significant differences in banking status by income and by race and ethnicity. These similarities are discouraging, but they increase confidence in the validity of the pantry-level survey results, which are among the most specific county and sub-county results available for any given subpopulation; banking access data is typically only available at the state or national level.

**Banking Access among Pantry Visitor Households**



- Unbanked
- Underbanked
- Fully Banked
- Don't Know/Prefer not to answer

### Food Pantry Visitor Banking Status by Race/Ethnicity

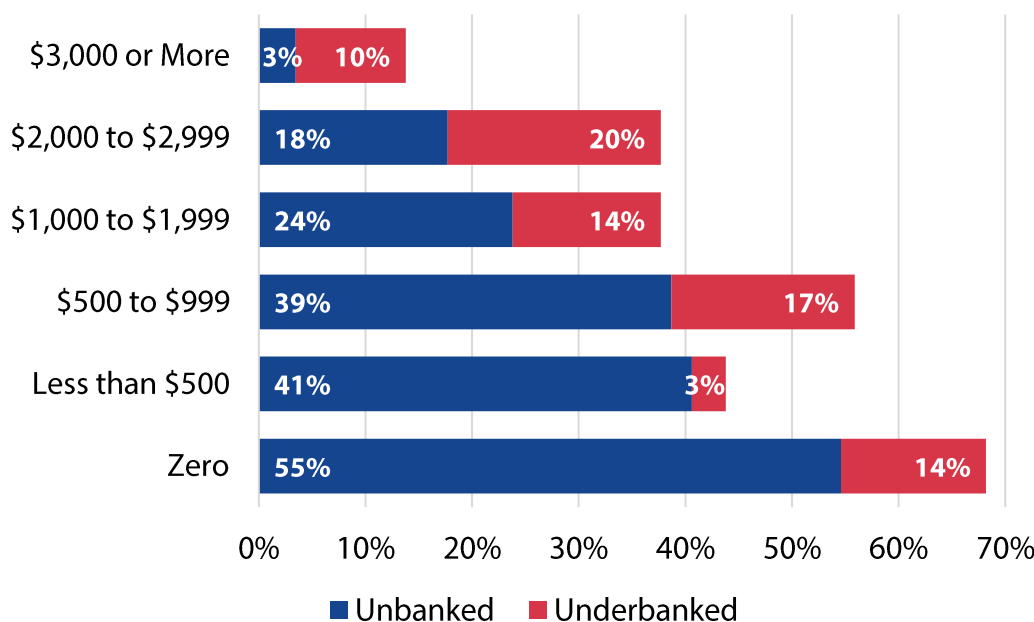


Among pantry visitors in Lebanon County, unbanked rates are highest for Black and Hispanic households, with around 40% of these households lacking access to a banking account. Rates of unbanked status among white pantry visitors are half that of Black and Hispanic households, though still high, at 19%.

Underbanked status, wherein households have a checking or savings account but report utilizing alternative financial services, is similarly high among households of all race/ethnicities, at between 11% and 18%. There was not enough data to formulate specific estimates for Asian households, but the small sample size results preliminarily indicate that underbanked status are a bigger issue among Asian households than unbanked status, with few households reporting this issue. Further surveys would be needed to verify this tentative finding among Asian households.

Banking status varies significantly among pantry visitor households by income level, although for each ratio of income to poverty level category, Black and Hispanic households are significantly more likely than white households to be unbanked. Among households who report \$0 income in the last month, 55% are unbanked. This status becomes gradually less severe as household income increases but does not cease to be a major issue for around 20% of households until monthly income reaches \$3,000 or more; just 3% of households with monthly incomes of \$3,000 or more do not have access to a bank account. Underbanked status, on the other hand, has similar severity among all household income categories, except for households with between \$0 and \$500 in monthly household income. These households are very likely to be unbanked, but very few households in this category are underbanked.

### Banking Status by Income among Pantry Visitors

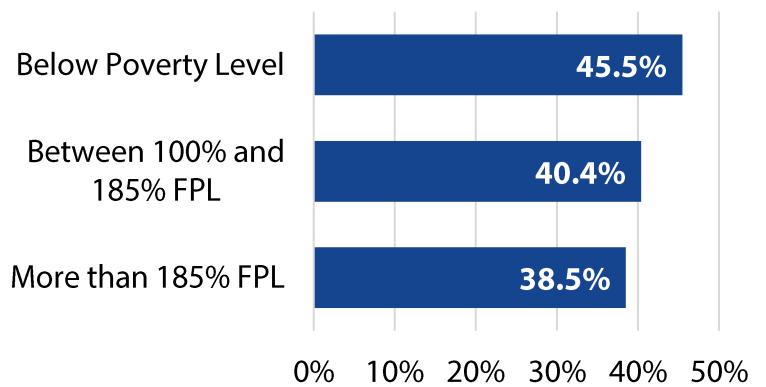


The food pantry visitor survey did not ask why pantry visitors did not have a mainstream financial system checking or savings account. However, national surveys of unbanked and underbanked households reveal that the top reasons for not having a bank account include not having enough money to meet minimum balance requirements, lack of trust in banks, and high or unpredictable fees.<sup>35</sup>

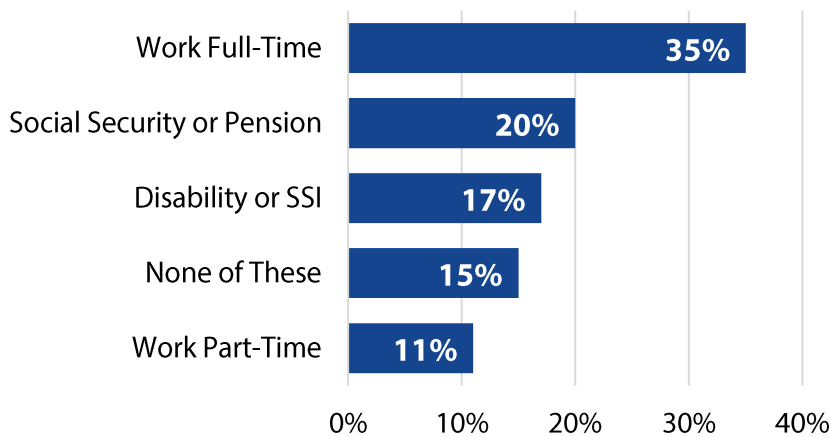
### Income Gaps and Sources

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 poverty line are more likely to experience very low food security than are households who earn at higher thresholds. Households who earn less than \$500 a month and can be classified as experiencing extreme poverty (less than 50% FPL), have very low food security rates of 54%.

### Very Low Food Security Rate by Ratio of Income to Poverty Level



### Main Source of Household Income

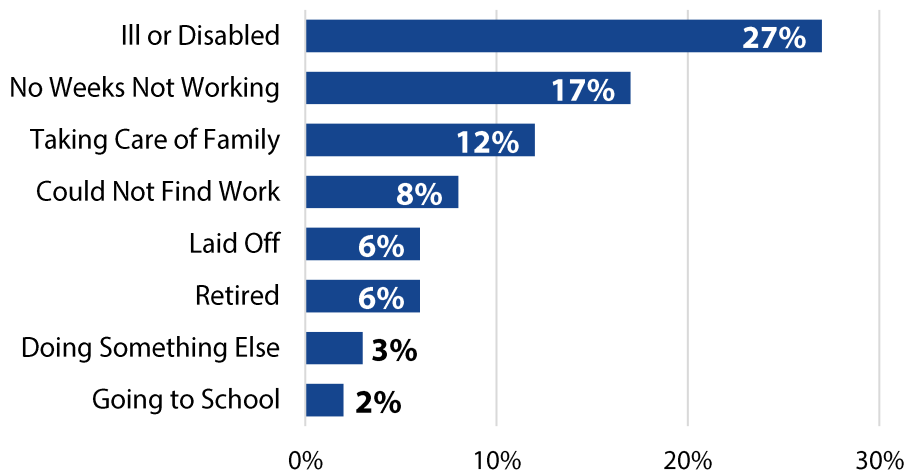


A total of 72% of pantry visitors report working either full time, receiving Social Security, or receiving Social Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability (SSDI) payments, with the most common work experience being full-time work. An additional 11% of households reported working part time. This means that less than 30% of households are unemployed or underemployed. The 30% figure is also very likely to be an overestimate because 5% of respondents did not wish to answer the income sources question.

Pantry visitors looking for work could benefit from the promotion of job openings at their food pantries. Survey results also suggest that there may be an interest in continued educational opportunities, as 22% of pantry visitors in Lebanon have less than a high school degree. Partners should also consider advertising GED courses, Head Start programs, English as a Second Language, and other educational and workforce development programs to ensure better awareness of opportunities available throughout the county.

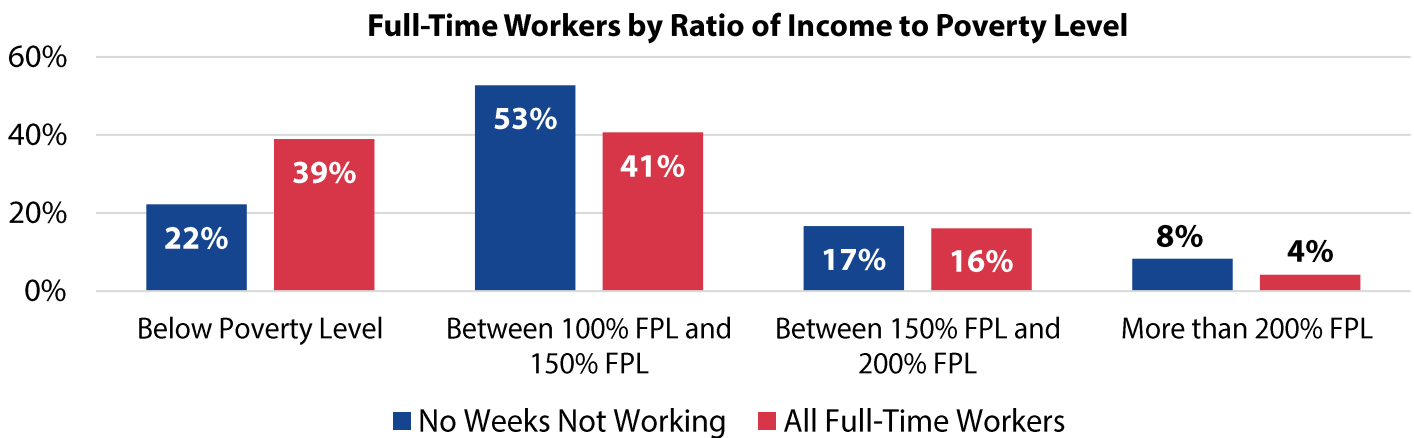
Among the main reasons for not working in the last year for working-age households, being ill/disabled tops the list by a significant amount, at 27% of households. The next most common response was that they had no weeks not working at 17%, while 12% of households reported not working because they had to take care of family. Just 14% of households reported not being able to find work or being laid off.

### Main Reasons Pantry Visitors Report for Not Working



From a policy standpoint, this implies that work requirements in government programs among food insecurity individuals are more likely to hurt disabled individuals and household caregivers than they are to result in additional people finding and securing employment.

Additionally, people who are disabled and receive SSDI or SSI experience higher rates of very low food security than the general population, at 46% compared to the 41% for all households. SSDI or SSI recipients are nearly twice as likely as the general population to earn between \$500 and \$999 per month, with 42% of households receiving SSDI or SSI falling in this category, compared to just 22% overall. It is clear that the inadequacy of SSDI and SSI payments has an outsized impact on very low food security status among the food pantry visitor population in Lebanon County. This extremely prevalent rate of very low food security among households receiving SSDI or SSI exists even though 78% of these households report receiving SNAP benefits, compared to just 45% of the total food pantry visitor population.



Among households who report working full time, fully 80% earn less than 150% of the federal poverty line. 39% of respondents earn monthly incomes that would place their households below the poverty level, while an additional 41% have monthly incomes between 100% and 150% of the federal poverty line. These numbers improve when restricting the data to the 10% of households who work full time and report no weeks not working in the last year, as just 22% of these households have earnings below the poverty line. This indicates the importance of consistent, regular work in ensuring that people have an opportunity to improve their economic standing and that opportunities like temp jobs, seasonal work, gig work, and other low wage, irregular or inconsistent work arrangements are not enough to lift people out of poverty.

Follow-up conversations with food pantry visitors could further explore whether unpredictable and irregular hours and schedules or low wages are the main obstacle facing food pantry visitor households who work full time. Extensive research literature shows that low wages, unpredictable schedules, and temp work arrangements are among the main causes of economic insecurity among low-income households.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that survey participants were asked for their total household monthly income in ranges of \$1,000 (e.g. \$2,000 to \$2,999). The ratio of income to poverty level estimates calculated in this report assume the highest possible income for a monthly household income range that people select (e.g. \$2,999), so the estimates of full-time workers with incomes below the poverty level are a lower-bound estimate.

This data means that low wages and temporary or inconsistent jobs impact people who visit pantries and that the charitable food system has a role to play in advocating for family-sustaining wages and equitable employment conditions. It is important to note that low wages are a systemic issue that are not isolated to households who visit food pantries.

**A quarter of all Lebanon County households earn less than 185% of the federal poverty level and qualify for government funded food. This equates to over 36,000 Lebanon County residents (26%) who qualify for charitable food assistance, including more than 50% of Lebanon City residents.**

### 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 census tracts in which 500 people, or 33% of the population, live further than a half mile (in urban areas) or ten miles (in rural areas) from their nearest grocery store.<sup>37</sup> The most severe are census tracts that meet the same distance and population criteria and have 100 or more households without access to a vehicle.<sup>38</sup>

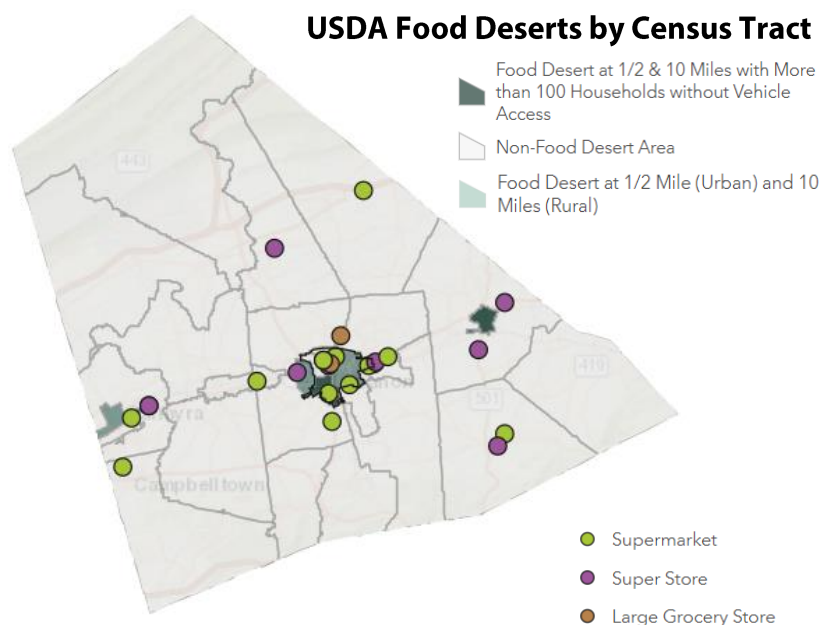
In Lebanon County, seven census tracts meet the less severe low-access definition, including four in Lebanon City, one in West Lebanon Township, one in Palmyra, and one in Myerstown. Two of these seven are also low-vehicle access areas, meaning they meet the second, more severe desert definition, including Census Tract 2 in southwest Lebanon City and the entire borough of Myerstown.

There are significant 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 reflective of real experiences. For instance, as shown on the map at right, most census tracts in Lebanon City are relatively close to a supermarket, but most of their centers of population are slightly more than half a mile from the nearest grocery store, making them far enough to be flagged by the USDA criteria cut-off but not far enough to make a major difference.

Even the low vehicle access food desert in southwest Lebanon City has a Weis Markets within its boundaries and just a five-minute walk from its center of population. Grocery access is the most severe in Myerstown, but the high number of households without vehicle access is likely due to the Amish population in that area of the county.

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.<sup>39,40</sup> As shown by the above discussion, this is likely to be the case in Lebanon County. 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.<sup>41</sup>

DUFb programs have been proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption<sup>42</sup> and 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 Pennsylvania, a DUFb program in Lebanon in partnership with grocery stores, corner stores, and farmers markets would give households additional choice and help address inequities in access to sufficient nutritious foods.





## Intersecting and Upstream Issues Recommendations

**Section 4 Finding 1: Housing and utility costs are the main economic tradeoff households must consider when buying food, as more than half of households reported needing to make a choice between paying for rent/mortgage or utilities and food. A total of 8% of food pantry visitors reported experiencing a forced move such as an eviction or foreclosure in the last year, while 20% are worried about being forced to move in the next year.**

Fully 55% of households report having to choose between food and utilities (41% of respondents) or between food and rent/mortgage (36% of respondents).

Neighbors report that forced moves create chaotic “doubled-up” arrangements with family or friends, and that the potential loss of control over their housing situation would be devastating to their family’s well-being. It is physically and emotionally exhausting for people to not have control of their living situation, especially when experiencing homelessness.

### **Recommendation: Food pantries**

**should be cognizant of the housing issues the neighbors they serve may face. For example, they should ensure that they have foods tailored for unstably or marginally housed households and make these items easily accessible.**

In addition, voluntary eviction mediation programs, in tandem with eviction prevention assistance, could be a valuable tool for the county. Similar programs have been developed in neighboring counties, although not always on a sustained basis.

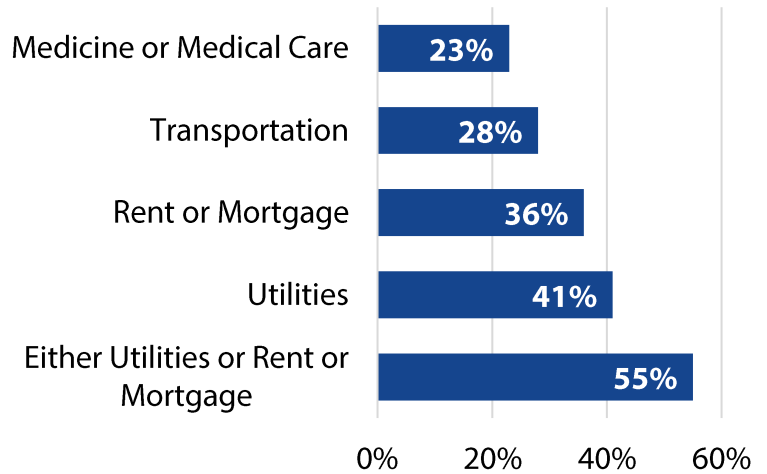
Pantries should continue utility assistance programs and advertise if other housing assistance is available. Pantries report that many neighbors wait to ask for help until they are very far behind on their utility or housing bills, and this makes it more difficult to help. The trust-building that occurs when working to improve the neighbor experience at food pantries may lead to more increased willingness to seek help earlier.

**Section 4 Finding 3: Income is one of the most important factors impacting a household’s food security status, but 40% of households who work full time earn less than the federal poverty level. A total of 80% of households who report working full time earn less than 150% FPL.**

Irregular work has a big impact on the rate of full-time workers with incomes below the poverty line. Just over a fifth (22%) of households who report no weeks not working had incomes below the federal poverty line, which is significantly lower than households who report more irregular working status.

Most pantry visitors who can work, do work. More than 70% of visitors either work full time, receive Social Security, or receive SSI or SSDI. An additional 11% of households work part time.

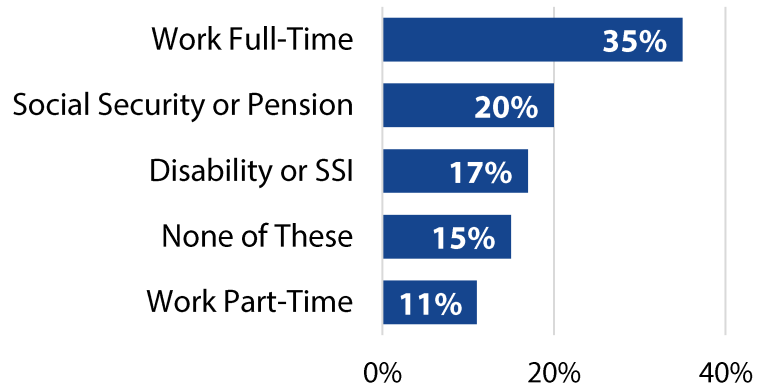
**Economic Tradeoffs with Food**



**Recommendation: Low wages and irregular working hours dramatically affect the incomes of full-time workers who visit food pantries in Lebanon County. Interested stakeholders and the charitable food system should advocate for family-sustaining wages.**

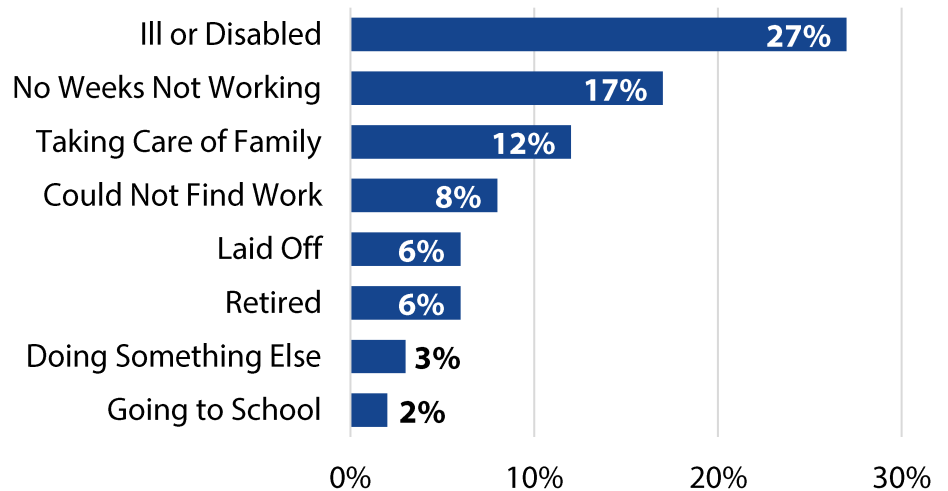
Other changes that can help reduce the instability of low wage work are an increase in the minimum wage and “fair work week” legislation that requires companies to give employees their schedules at least two weeks in advance. Further engagement with pantry visitors about the most important issues they see as they navigate work could better inform program design and advocacy.

**Main Source of Household Income**



**Section 4 Finding 4: The primary reason pantry visitors report not working is being ill or disabled. 27% of households who are not working point to that barrier, more than double that of taking care of family, the second most-cited reason. However, disability payments are very low and are often not enough to keep people from facing very low food security.**

**Main Reasons Pantry Visitors Report for Not Working**

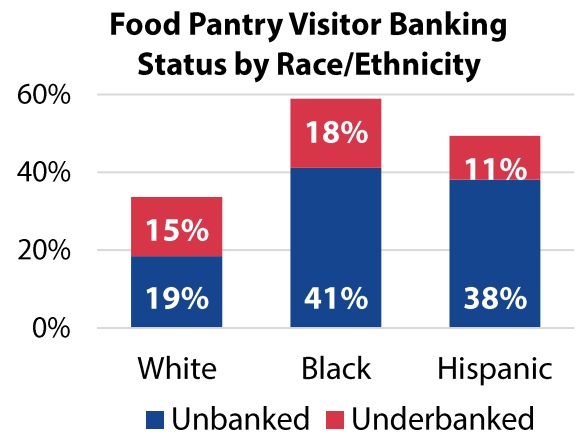


Households with a disabled individual and who report receiving SSDI or SSI experience higher rates of very low food security than the general population, even though nearly 80% of SSDI or SSI recipients report receiving SNAP. Recipients of SSDI and SSI are nearly twice as likely to report having incomes between \$500 and \$999 per month (42% compared to 22% overall).

**Recommendation: Disability policy and payment amounts have an outsized impact on very low food security status.** Interested stakeholders and the charitable food system should continue to work to connect disabled individuals to other available resources to supplement their low SSDI and SSI benefits and advocate for more adequate benefits with federal policymakers. Stakeholders should further advocate against work requirements for SNAP and other safety net programs, as many households who report a disability or other barrier to work but who do not receive SSDI or SSI will be left out of crucial safety net programs.

**Section 4 Finding 5: More than one-fourth (27%) of pantry visitors in Lebanon County are unbanked, while an additional 14% are classified as underbanked, meaning they have access to a bank account but still utilize expensive alternative financial services. In total, more than 40% of pantry visitors have limited access to mainstream financial services.**

Access to financial services varies dramatically by race/ethnicity among the pantry visitor population, mirroring national trends. Around 40% of Black and Hispanic households are unbanked compared to just 19% of white households. Lower-income households are also much less likely to have access to a bank account, including more than half of households who report zero income in the last month and 40% of households who report between \$0 and \$1,000 in income. A quarter of households (24%) who earn between \$1,000 and \$2,000 and a fifth of households (18%) who earn between \$2,000 and \$3,000 a month are unbanked.



While the survey of food pantry visitors did not ask why households did not have a bank account, national surveys show that the main reasons for not having a bank account are not having enough money to meet minimum balance requirements, lack of trust in banks, and high or unpredictable fees.<sup>43</sup>

**Recommendation: The charitable food system should consider partnering with financial institutions to connect people to financial services that work for their circumstances, such as bank accounts targeted towards low-income individuals.**

Tax time is a potentially effective time to connect people to mainstream financial services, as it represents a “bankable” moment, when individuals have access to their refunds and can deposit them in a newly opened account. Recent research has pointed to the impact of “bankable” moments in connecting people to accounts that work for them.

It is crucial that financial institutions offer accounts that work for low-income individuals, as there are good reasons that people currently do not participate in the mainstream financial system. Initiatives like Bank On can help create financial products that work for low-income households and connect unbanked populations to mainstream financial services, while some financial institutions also offer other accounts catered to low-income customers.

**Section 4 Finding 6: There are relatively few traditionally defined severe food deserts in Lebanon County, with southwest Lebanon City and Myerstown as the primary exceptions. However, income has a much more dramatic impact on the accessibility of fresh foods.**

**Recommendation: The Lebanon Better Together Healthy Food Access Action Team could consider working on a Double-Up Food Bucks program at key grocery stores in Lebanon County, providing a match for every \$1 spent with SNAP benefits on fruits and vegetables. These programs increase choice and have proven to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.**

The Lebanon Better Together Healthy Food Access Action Team could collaborate with local health systems and grocery stores to pilot a DUFEB program in select areas of Lebanon County locally, such as in western Lebanon City and advocate for implementation of a statewide program.

In addition, to address the significant lack of vehicle access in areas of Lebanon County, especially in areas without nearby grocery stores or public transportation, stakeholders should consider working with local retailers on piloting free grocery delivery programs to SNAP recipients. This partnership could both make fresh food more readily accessible in Lebanon County and increase incentives for neighbors to sign up for SNAP.

## Conclusion and Final Recommendations

The 2023 Lebanon County Community Hunger Mapping Report is the capstone on the end of a year-long effort to better understand the charitable food network in Lebanon County by analyzing publicly available data with innovative and rigorous analysis techniques, reviewing and synthesizing existing research, engaging with community stakeholders, and crucially, listening to and learning from the people who visit the county's food pantries. All the effort that went in to building this document was in service of working to accurately portray the experiences of the neighbors who are served by Lebanon County's charitable food providers and providing an informative, actionable resource that can be used to improve those experiences as well as eventually end hunger in the county.

Although this report marks the end of a project, it is also just the beginning. The insights provided in this report are valuable in their own right, but ongoing implementation of recommendations and evaluation of progress are what will truly make a difference for Lebanon's food insecure neighbors.

The research and data collection infrastructure that was built as part of primary data collection for this report for this report will help provide some of the ongoing metrics that will be needed to measure progress, but stakeholders, including but not limited to the Lebanon County Healthy Food Access Action Team, Wellspan Health, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, its partner food pantries, and other key stakeholders across Lebanon County must also intentionally implement and assess the impacts of the recommendations in this report to work towards a Lebanon County in which no one is hungry.

## Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the generous financial support of Wellspan Health, as well as the input and insights of the Lebanon County Community Hunger Mapping Consultative group, whose members included Bryan Smith of Lebanon County Community Ministries, Donna Williams of Lebanon Family Health, Capt. Ivonne Rodriguez of The Salvation Army in Lebanon, Laurie Crawford and Erika Mollo of Penn State Health, Nicole Maurer Gray of the Community Health Council of Lebanon County, Shila Ulrich of the Caring Cupboard, and Joe Arthur, Tara Davis, and Maria D'Isabella of the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank. Thank you all for the time and care you invested into this project and that you continue to invest in the Lebanon County community.

Our neighbors who were generous enough to share the reality of their lives with us via surveys, focus groups, and interviews provided priceless insight into the challenging circumstances they face on a daily basis. Their words are the most important ones in this entire report. Endless thanks to each and every neighbor who took time out of their day to complete a survey or speak with us.

The voices of our neighbors would also not have been able to be included in this report without the patience and kindness of many pantry coordinators across Lebanon County who allowed the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's Policy Research team to conduct surveys during distributions. Thank you for your grace and for all you do for those you serve. Focus groups were conducted by Jason Kirsch and Lauren Gorbey of PR Works Inc.

Special thanks to the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank staff outside the Policy Research department who assisted in survey administration, especially Loyna DeJesus, without whom we would not have been able to connect with our Spanish-speaking neighbors nearly as deeply.



## Endnotes

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