



Food Access & Insecurity

Background

As noted in the ACS FY 2021 Self Sufficiency Indicators Report, even with the median income of the Howard County being \$124,042, an estimated that 24,620 individuals – or approximately 1 in 7 residents – living in the county faced food insecurity in 2019. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity “as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household for an active, healthy life.” In Howard County, the three main programs backed by federal funding to combat food insecurity are: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infant and Children’s Program (WIC), and food support through the Howard County Food Bank. Within the Howard County Public School System, 26% of students (14,846) utilized the Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) program, indicating challenges to consistent access to food.

Key Issues

- **Benefits Cliff:** Income levels for key benefits are too low for Howard County compared to the self-sufficiency standard of between \$75,000¹ and \$85,000².
 - SNAP benefits become overscale at \$28,500 for a single parent with two school-aged children. As income increases, SNAP benefits reduce. The loss of benefits occurs at such a low level that families remain food insecure even though they are above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The need to provide food assistance for more than just those at or below FPL puts increased burden on non-income based food programming.
 - Increase in benefits amounts or minimum wage can also cause loss of benefits. For example, the recent increase in SSI benefits lead to many individuals becoming ineligible for the The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). The TEFAP program and its providers had to scramble to ensure neighbors in need could continue to receive assistance.
- **Obstacles to Access:** Too many obstacles (e.g., ID, proof of income) prevent residents from accessing services and organizations who remove these obstacles need more funding. Undocumented families will not come to providers who require documentation of income or residency. Additionally, living in poverty and/or experiencing homelessness makes it difficult to maintain the level of documentation that is often required to access services.
- **Transportation to Food Resources:** Current public transportation in Howard County is limited and, in some areas, nonexistent, which limits access to food resources and poses challenges to keeping temperature-sensitive foods stable in transit. If families do not own a car, they cannot access many of the services in the County. It would take a family living in Ellicott City over two hours on the bus to reach the multi-service center.
- Howard County needs more culturally sensitive approaches to food access that meets the needs of our diverse communities.

¹ ACS Self-Sufficiency Indicators Report: <https://www.acshoco.org/self-sufficiency-indicators/>

² HoCo Dash: <https://dash.howardcountymd.gov/Demographics.aspx>



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Recommendations

- Adjust benefit amounts across the board to manage the impacts of increasing minimum wage and benefits on the eligibility for support through other programs.
- Funding Priorities:
 - Dedicate support address food deserts, both for areas that meet the federal standard of food deserts and the areas that do not meet the federal standard but are functionally still food deserts.
 - Focus on resources for organizations that take a culturally responsive approach to food access and focus on choice/variety of fresh and high quality food.
 - Target special funding for strategic partnerships that are available for: nonprofits that collaborate around food insecurity (e.g., CAC, CCC, CEI), supporting food programs with a 2-Generational approach, and programs that build generational wealth and support coordination
 - Food and housing coops
 - BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) farmers and the creation of sustainable community gardens
- Improve public transportation in the County to increase access not only to food but also to services provided by organizations in the Human Services campus.
- Schools/Education:
 - Fully utilize the *Blueprint for Maryland's Future* Community Schools model to bring services to youth and families and involve their voice in the solutions. Bring this perspective to the higher decision making level.
 - Bring Universal Meals to Maryland: Breakfast and lunch provided to all students regardless of income during school programming. This could be expanded to daycare, recreational programming, and extended breaks from school (e.g., summer, spring, winter breaks).
- Address the density of unhealthy or harmful business (e.g., liquor stores, fast food) in communities of color and invest in BIPOC owned business that holistically enhance healthy communities
- Expand Ban-the-Box legislation to increase the inclusiveness in civic engagement so people living with food insecurity can directly influence and impact the programs in which they participate.
- Do an audit of predatory lending practices that target and create financial instability for people of color and seniors, which leads to food insecurity.