

FOOD ACCESS AND SECURITY

Project Summary

Tompkins Food Future is a community food system planning initiative to craft the first-ever comprehensive food system plan for Tompkins County. The goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable, affordable and healthy food system for all members of our community. What follows is an overview of the state of our local food system gleaned from community conversations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, neighborhood canvassing, and data collection. This section covers **Food Access and Security**.

Introduction

Food is an essential component to human life. Being well nourished enables us to sleep well, exercise, perform well at school or work, and live a full life. Even if we ourselves are food secure, the food insecurity of our neighbors impacts the whole community.

Food is accessible when it is affordable and community members can readily grow or raise it, find it, obtain it, transport it, prepare it, and eat it. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

Despite the abundance of food available in Tompkins County, over 11,000 of our neighbors struggle to regularly access and afford enough fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food that meets their preferences. Here we explore the nature and scope of food insecurity in Tompkins County and some of the conditions that inhibit food access.

One challenge we all share is that of a changing climate. Temperature shifts, extreme weather events, and coastal flooding profoundly affect the production and distribution of food, exacerbating price spikes, shortfalls, and inequalities in food access.

Many in our community champion food sovereignty, an idea developed by Via Campesina and brought to the public in 1996.

"Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations."

Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007

Challenges

Affordability: An average meal in Tompkins County is 17% more expensive than the national average. High-cost food places an additional burden on low-income residents already struggling to afford housing, childcare, transportation, and other necessities. Fully

To access the full content of the Food Access and Security baseline - a living document with room for ongoing community input and updates - please visit: <https://www.tompkinsfoodfuture.org/food-system-plan>

TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD ACCESS AT-A-GLANCE

Food security means always having physical & economic access to sufficient, safe & nutritious food that meets their needs for an active and healthy life.

11.6%
OF RESIDENTS ARE
FOOD INSECURE

13.3%
OF CHILDREN ARE
FOOD INSECURE

\$7.4M
EXTRA NEEDED FOR
FOOD INSECURE
FAMILIES TO MEET
THEIR NEEDS

1/3
FOOD INSECURE
RESIDENTS NOT
ELIGIBLE FOR SNAP

62%
SNAP ELIGIBLE
RESIDENTS NOT
ENROLLED

17%
AN AVERAGE MEAL
IN TOMPKINS COSTS
ABOVE THE
NATIONAL AVE.



WIC

PARTICIPATION HAS
DECLINED SINCE 2011



TRUMANSBURG GROTON ENFIELD FOOD INSECURITY HOTSPOTS



Warming, extreme weather events, and coastal flooding will all reduce the production and distribution of food. These shifts will lead to price spikes, shortfalls and exacerbated inequalities.



52%
WHEAT LOSS BY END
OF THE CENTURY

75%
FOOD COMES FROM
JUST 12 PLANTS AND
5 ANIMALS

77%
WORLD'S
FARMLAND USED
FOR ANIMAL FEED
OR GRAZING

one-third of food insecure residents earn too much to qualify for public food assistance programs, yet struggle to stretch a limited food budget. Among those Tompkins residents who are eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps), only 30-40% are enrolled. Neither SNAP nor WIC (Women Infants and Children) cover all food costs and the enrollment process and eligibility are challenging to navigate.

Transportation: A spectrum of transportation-related issues disrupt food access and security, including not owning a vehicle (over 5,500 residents), lacking reliable access to a vehicle or ride, inaccessibility of bus routes and times, the hardship of transporting groceries on a bus, and limited food delivery.

Time: Food shopping and preparation is time consuming. SNAP and WIC provide groceries that include canned and frozen meals, but fresh prepared foods are not allowed. Without adequate space and equipment, cooking becomes even more time consuming and the nutritional balance of food consumed suffers.

Systemic Problems, Root Causes: Food insecurity is inherently tied to other structural factors: inadequate wages, intergenerational poverty, racism and classism, mental health and physical disabilities, and housing and transportation insecurity. Racial disparities in food assistance enrollment show higher levels of food insecurity among Black residents, which is layered on top of the lowest rates of income and highest rates of poverty in the county.

Awareness of Support Services: Private food assistance programs help residents access and afford food. The majority of services in Tompkins are concentrated in

the City of Ithaca and residents find it challenging to keep track of what is available and when, who is eligible, and what to do to receive support. Families without transportation, people living in rural areas, people with disabilities, seniors, children (especially 0-4) and people of color are hardest to reach with existing services.

Limited Access to Nutritious, Fresh, Culturally Appropriate Foods: Produce is challenging to distribute and keep fresh, so small retailers and many pantries opt for shelf-stable food options. These convenience foods do not fill the nutritional, cultural, or preferential needs of county residents.

Evolving Emergency Feeding Programs: Food pantries and other safety net food programs provide crucial support to people in need of food. Unfortunately, stigma deters people from utilizing these services. Residents running pantries expressed their dissatisfaction with the emergency food distribution model and a desire to dramatically shift the service model toward “free groceries” or “food centers” and reduce the need for them altogether. They also expressed the need to train pantry volunteers in trauma-informed service and a desire to hire staff as rates of volunteerism decline. Without paid staff and consistent funding, pantries lack the resources to build capacity in many important areas, including grant-writing, data collection and tracking, delivery systems, sourcing and storing fresh and culturally appropriate foods, customer service skill development, and community outreach—all of which could help address unmet needs.

Climate-Induced Food Losses: Access to food in Tompkins County depends upon a vast global network of producers who use a wide array of means to safely transport perishable and staple items. Worldwide, these systems are under threat from shifting temperatures, extreme weather, and rising seas. The resulting shortfall in supplies, increased costs for cooling and transportation infrastructure, and more frequent spoilage of perishable items will likely reduce our ability to access preferred foods and increase our grocery bills.

How would you describe your biggest concerns around food in your life?

(word-for-word responses)

“ Stretching a fixed monthly budget.

Is it fresh, is it safe, am I able to get to it? ”

“ Meat, Dairy, produce. Cans available but need fresh too. ”

“ Access to affordable healthy food, I prefer local and organic, especially meat, but don’t want to be picky about free food ”

“ Not enough food, short on oils, spices ”

“ Nutritious food is very expensive! ”

“ I’m worried about not being able to feed my kids and I’m worried about getting food if we get quarantined. We can’t use SNAP and WIC unless we go into the store and have no nearby family. ”

“ Eating healthy, knowing what’s healthy, what’s not (has Type II diabetes) ”

”

Opportunities

"People need to be supported in three areas at once: having money to buy food, having transport to get it, and having time to cook it."

Pay a living wage throughout Tompkins to help more households afford food as well as housing, childcare, and other necessities and decrease reliance on emergency programs.

Make SNAP participation easier to increase the food budgets of the 62% of eligible households not currently enrolled. Catholic Charities helps with SNAP enrollment: A campaign to support enrollment and reduce stigma is underway by the Childhood Nutrition Collaborative in collaboration with the Nutrition Outreach Education Program (NOEP) coordinator at Catholic Charities.

Provide free transportation for food access to support the use of SNAP and WIC benefits. Similar programs support free rides to healthcare appointments. Access to nourishing food would provide preventative care for food insecure residents who currently add \$10-\$20 million to our county's health care costs.

Provide free/low-cost food delivery for low-income households to minimize the burden transportation places on food access. Leverage points include financial support for expanded delivery from food pantries and expansion of pilot programs that permit delivery options for SNAP and WIC.

Expand community outreach to inform residents about their options and reduce stigma associated with financial food assistance and free grocery programs.

Improve data and resource management for food donations, food rescue, and perishable items to optimize distribution of emergency food to those who need and want it.

Develop our food assistance workforce to increase quality food and service in emergency food programs and boost referrals to health and human services in Tompkins.

What is your dream for a better food system for our community?

"Getting information out and accessible, hard to find info, especially if you don't know where to begin."

"Easier access to food, increased SNAP benefits, pantries that can help more with food allergies, produce more easily accessible"

"Fresh, local healthy food accessible to everyone"

"Wow! Can we grow food everywhere? Stop planting ornamentals, plant fruit and nut bushes instead. Parks could have fruit for everyone! Clean soil is also essential!"

"Delivery options have improved because of Covid, more free delivery for rural, disabled and elderly"

"Everyone receives high quality food and therefore needs less medicine"