



Figure 1: Official seal of Montgomery County, Maryland, featuring a circular blue border with the text “Montgomery County Maryland,” the year 1776, and a central heraldic shield with decorative elements and the motto “Garde Bien.”

Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger

2023



Figure 2: Collage of children eating a variety of healthy meals and snacks in school and community environments, including fruits, vegetables, salads, and hot meals, representing diverse ages and backgrounds and emphasizing access to nutritious food.

Letter from County Executive Elrich and Councilmember Alborno

The Scope of Childhood Hunger

Childhood hunger touches all corners of our County. According to the latest research and available data, at least 14% of children in Montgomery County, approximately 34,000, are food insecure, and thousands more are living in households without sufficient income to meet their basic needs. Our County's food security response during the pandemic has been nationally recognized as collaborative, strategic, and innovative, and we must now build on those successes in transitioning to a long-term sustainable approach to fighting hunger in our community. All families should have sufficient access to the necessary nutritional resources that meet the cultural preferences and dietary needs of their children. Montgomery County is fortunate to have tremendous strengths—a robust food assistance network, a strong nonprofit sector, and government leaders dedicated to ensuring that every child never has to worry about their next meal. We have arrived at a point where we can boldly state that it is possible to end childhood hunger in our community. The Montgomery County Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger is the first step in this process.

Strategic Plan Overview

This plan harnessed the expertise of local residents and organizations to identify food access barriers and strategies that will reduce food insecurity across all childhood age groups. Its recommendations are based on the feedback and insight of stakeholders, subject matter experts, and local residents, ensuring that lived experience of food insecurity and service delivery are embedded throughout the plan's analysis and strategies. Serving as a roadmap for both short- and long-term County planning, the plan highlights opportunities to better connect families to existing federal, state, and local programs while also identifying new and novel approaches to meet the unique needs of our incredibly diverse population.

The Urgency of Action

We are keenly aware that there is a hunger cliff looming for food insecure residents of Montgomery County. As pandemic-enacted food security measures, such as universal school meals and SNAP emergency allotments, come to an end at the same time that the cost of food is skyrocketing due to inflation, more Montgomery County residents—and more children—will experience food insecurity. There are already too many county residents who are forced to make impossible choices between paying rent, paying bills, and buying enough food to feed their families. That is why this initiative to prioritize ending childhood hunger is essential to ensure there are policies, programs, and funding in place so that children in Montgomery County have the food they need to thrive.



Figure 3: Formal portrait of a male county official wearing a dark suit, patterned tie, and

light-colored shirt, photographed from the chest up against a blurred outdoor background.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature is written in a cursive style, with the first name 'Marc' clearly legible and the last name 'Elrich' written in a more stylized, flowing script.

Figure 4: Scanned handwritten signature of Marc Elrich in black ink on a white background.



Figure 5: Formal portrait of a male councilmember wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red striped tie, standing indoors with a flag visible in the background.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature is written in a cursive style, with the first name 'Gabe' clearly legible and the last name 'Albornoz' written in a more stylized, flowing script.

Figure 6: Scanned handwritten signature of Gabe Albornoz in black ink on a white background.

Signed,

Gabe Albornoz
Councilmember, At-Large
Chair, Health and Human Services Committee

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Executive Summary

Montgomery County's Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger is organized around three major objectives:

1. Determine the scope and scale of food insecurity among children in the County.
2. Identify the barriers food insecure children in the County face in accessing safe, sufficient, culturally familiar nutritious food.
3. Formulate potential strategies to address childhood hunger that overcome those barriers and challenges.

Childhood Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

Measuring childhood hunger at the local level is difficult, as there is not a direct measurement or survey of childhood food insecurity, which is defined as a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” For this reason, a collection of indirect measures is used in this plan to paint a picture of the scale of need. Feeding America estimates that 13.9% of all children in Montgomery County face food insecurity and over the past five years, that rate has ranged between 10% and 14%. Other critical measures, however, indicate food insecurity among children could be far higher. In 2021, there were approximately 52,000 children living in Montgomery County in households with incomes below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which is an important eligibility cut-off for federal support. Measures that take into consideration the relatively high cost of living in Montgomery County paint an even bleaker picture. In 2021, roughly 45% of children are estimated to have lived in households with incomes below the University of Washington's Self Sufficiency Standard for this area. These measures vary significantly; but, taken in their totality, they give policy leaders and community members a sense of the need to be addressed. At least 14% of children in Montgomery County are food insecure, and far more live in households without sufficient income to meet their basic needs.

The data also reveals significant racial disparity in childhood food insecurity. While 4.5% of white children in Montgomery County are estimated to live in households with incomes below the Federal Poverty Level, that same measure for Hispanic or Latino and Black children is over 14%. Solutions must also acknowledge that roughly half of children living in households below the Federal Poverty Level speak languages other than English at home, with 35% living in Spanish-speaking households.

Executive Summary

Strategies to Address Childhood Food Insecurity

The Montgomery County Food Council interviewed over one hundred subject matter experts to develop a collection of proposed strategies to end childhood hunger in Montgomery County. This plan organizes these recommendations into three groups based on how they address childhood food insecurity.

Direct Financial Benefits

1. **Expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs:** SNAP is our nation's first line of defense against hunger, but many eligible residents are not receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. Community-based organizations could expand their services to include SNAP outreach and enrollment expertise in order to meet the overwhelming demand.
2. **Address Benefit Inadequacy, Especially During the Summer:** Benefit inadequacy is greatest during the summer when children are not receiving meals at school. Providing a food benefit that allows families to shop at their preferred grocer can effectively combat food insecurity experienced while children are not in school.
3. **Provide Direct Benefits to SNAP-Ineligible Households:** Some households with children in Montgomery County do not qualify for SNAP but still struggle with food insecurity. Providing these households with direct benefits would help ensure that children are food secure even without federal assistance.

School and Childcare Adjacent Food Assistance

1. **Expansion of Free School Meals:** Free school meals connect food-insecure children with reliable, nutritious meals. However, not all eligible children benefit due to barriers such as eligibility criteria and stigma. Expanding the reach of the school lunch program—either to all students or to those living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard—would help ensure that children who could benefit receive free school meals.
2. **Expansion of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP):** Over the past five years, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of home daycares providing free meals and snacks to food-insecure children under the federal CACFP. Providing access to computers to complete newly required CACFP paperwork, along with increasing outreach to potentially eligible daycare providers, would benefit more young children countywide and leverage additional federal dollars to fight early childhood hunger.

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Existing Strategies

1. **Expand Early Head Start, Head Start, and Pre-K:** Head Start programs provide free meals to those enrolled, directly addressing childhood food insecurity. More classrooms would address the demand for these programs, which greatly outpaces the supply of enrollment openings, and close gaps that exist in program coverage for three-year-olds.
2. **Community Schools:** Community Schools are a critical pathway to providing wraparound services to children in areas of concentrated poverty. Ensuring that all new MCPS Community Schools have an in-school pantry or at-school distribution would help address food insecurity as part of those wraparound services.
3. **Weekend Bags:** Weekend bags provide a weekend's worth of food for school-age children who rely on free school meals during the school week. Program expansions could include a larger number of schools in the MCPS system.

3. Novel Approaches and New Pathways

1. **Direct-to-Household Food Assistance Program:** Many families with children lack transportation and have busy schedules, making it hard for them to access and receive food from food distributions. A new program model would create a platform to link food-insecure families with free food delivery.
2. **Food Is Medicine:** Clinicians and pediatricians are in a unique position to screen children for food insecurity and “prescribe” free food to children as treatment. Expanded Food Is Medicine programs would allow health professionals to refer families with children for benefits, resources, and support.
3. **Caretaker Nutritional Training:** Stakeholders highlighted the importance of adequate nutritional education for caretakers preparing meals for food-insecure children. Working in collaboration with universities and nutritional experts, a nutritional program specifically for caretakers of young children could be developed and delivered to fill this gap.
4. **Financial Literacy Training and Education:** Food insecurity stems from a lack of buying power. Budgeting, financial planning, and spending habits can significantly increase a family's buying power. Financial literacy and budgeting training could be offered to families experiencing food insecurity.
5. **Gardening Grant Program:** Existing county gardening grant programs could be increased to fund the expansion of existing and establishment of new community gardens and/or indoor gardens to provide educational opportunities and make fresh produce more accessible to food-insecure children.

Executive Summary

- **Improved Data-driven Decision Making:** Collecting data on food insecurity is notoriously difficult, but without reliable data, it can be difficult to evaluate the impact of current and new interventions and inform future policy and investment decision making. The County’s forthcoming Office of Food System Resilience, with its dedicated Food System Research Analyst, should undertake updating FoodStat and expanding the data sources analyzed to include grant and programmatic data from County-funded childhood hunger interventions.

For each of these strategies, a dedicated section details the specific proposal, the background that led to the recommendation, the rough cost of implementation of the recommendation, an indication of the potential impact, and a set of logical champions to lead strategy rollout.

Advocacy, Leadership, and Change

This plan focuses on actionable items that the Montgomery County government can do to address childhood food insecurity within its borders, but it also identifies areas for advocacy at the state and federal level that would have a huge impact locally, including policy changes to SNAP, school-based feeding programs, and other key nutrition programs.

In Montgomery County, childhood food insecurity is a symptom of deeper systemic inequities. The primary root cause is that many children in our community live in households with insufficient income to purchase adequate healthy food. While this crisis is fundamentally economic in nature, this plan focuses only on solutions related directly to food access. Though it is beyond the scope of this plan to propose non-food-centered economic and equity-building interventions, it is critically important to note that any intervention that increases the buying power of food-insecure families will directly reduce childhood hunger, even if its aim is not directly to provide food (such as efforts aimed at providing childcare and housing assistance, additional income supplements, tax credits, etc.).

This plan represents the first step in the process of ending childhood hunger in Montgomery County, providing a variety of strategies for County leaders to consider. The next step is for County leaders to identify which recommendations they would like to explore further in partnership with the identified champions and commit to long-term action in partnership with residents, community partners, and the private sector to use all available tools and resources to end childhood hunger in Montgomery County.

Childhood Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

Why is Ending Childhood Food Insecurity so Important?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Food Research & Action Center, “Food insecurity — even marginal food insecurity — is detrimental to children’s health, development, and well-being.”¹ It is associated with poor health status,² developmental risk, mental health problems,³ and poor educational outcomes⁴ that could have a negative impact over a child’s entire life.⁵

How Many Children Are There in Montgomery County, Maryland?

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there are 1,047,661 people living in Montgomery County, with 243,489 of those being under the age of 18.⁶ Of the children in the County, approximately 31.5% are below school-aged (6 years old or younger), 33.5% are between 6 and 11 years old, and the final 35% being between 11 and 17 years old.⁷

How Many Children Are Food Insecure?

Before addressing specific strategies to eliminate food insecurity among children in Montgomery County, it is important to clarify the meaning of food insecurity, especially as distinct from the colloquial term “hunger.” Hunger is defined as “an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity,” while food insecurity is the more technical term for “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.”⁸ This strategy is aimed at ending childhood food insecurity.



Figure 7: A group of elementary school-age children seated side by side at a cafeteria-style table, eating sandwiches and snacks from plastic lunch containers. The image visually represents children during mealtime and underscores the importance of reliable access to nutritious food in school and community settings.

¹Citation corresponding to reference 8 in the original document.

²Citation corresponding to reference 9 in the original document.

³Citation corresponding to reference 10 in the original document.

⁴Citation corresponding to reference 11 in the original document.

⁵Citation corresponding to reference 12 in the original document.

⁶Citation corresponding to reference 13 in the original document.

⁷Citation corresponding to reference 14 in the original document.

⁸Citation corresponding to reference 15 in the original document.

Childhood Food Insecurity in Montgomery County

Measuring food insecurity is a notoriously difficult task; “[while] its most extreme manifestations are often obvious, many other households facing constraints in their access to food are less identifiable.”¹ There is not a direct measurement or poll of children in Montgomery County aimed at determining their level of food security.

That said, a collection of indirect measures can paint a relatively clear picture of the scale of the need. The following sections will walk through some of those indicators, and examine what each can tell us about childhood hunger in Montgomery County.

Feeding America’s Data

Feeding America estimates that 33,840 children (13.9% of all children) in Montgomery County face food insecurity.² According to Feeding America, over the past five years, the food insecurity rate among children in Montgomery County has ranged between 10–14%.³ Figure 1 shows how the population of adults compares to the population of children in the County, and highlights the portion of food insecure children and adults. This measurement is based on a model that considers a variety of sources, including the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Current Population Survey and, along with income, unemployment rates, median incomes, and other factors that have been shown to be associated with food insecurity, disability prevalence—another key risk factor for food insecurity.⁴ As can be seen in Figure 2, Feeding America’s data shows that the rate of food insecurity among children is consistently near double that of overall food insecurity.

¹Source citation not provided in excerpt.

²Feeding America estimate for Montgomery County child food insecurity.

³Feeding America, five-year range of child food insecurity rates in Montgomery County.

⁴Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, M. Kato, A. Crumbaugh & M. Strayer. *Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017*. Feeding America, 2019.

2020 Food Insecurity Breakdown
 Montgomery County, Feeding America Data

Food Insecure Children

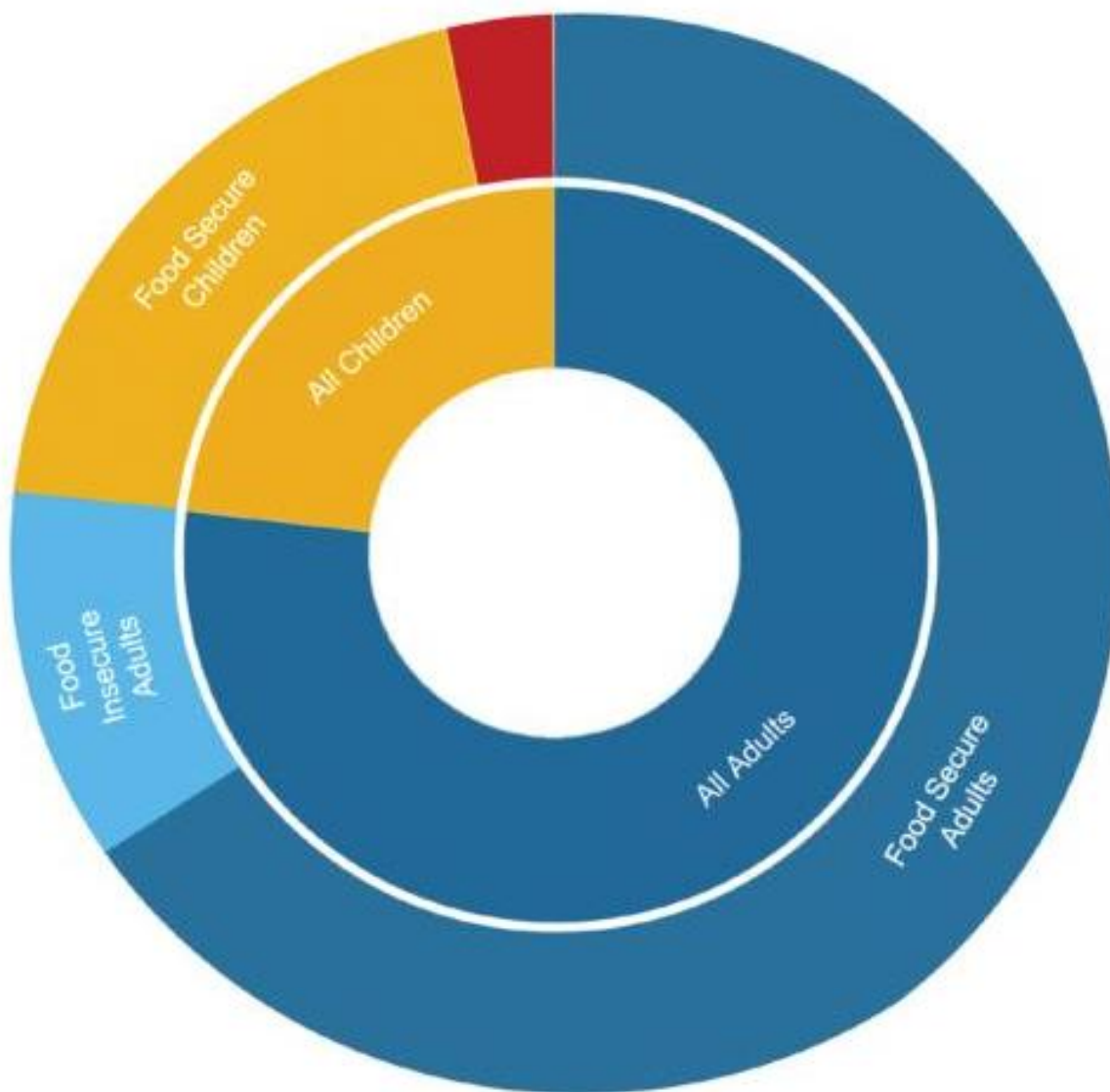
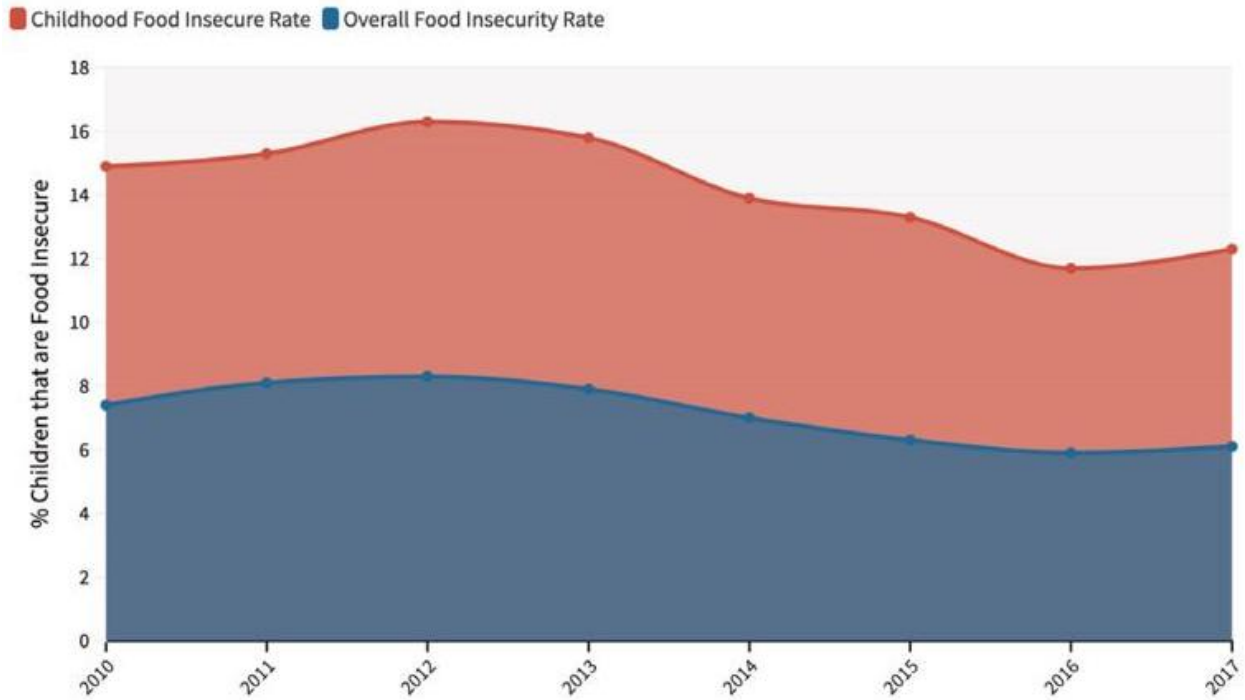


Figure 8: 2020 food insecurity breakdown in Montgomery County. The outer ring differentiates food secure and food insecure adults and children, while the inner ring shows the proportion of all adults compared to all children in the county population.



Source: Gundersen, C., A. Dewey, M. Kato, A. Crumbaugh & M. Strayer. Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017. Feeding America, 2019.

Figure 9: Trends in food insecurity rates from 2010 to 2017. The chart shows childhood food insecurity rates consistently higher than overall food insecurity rates across the period, with both peaking around 2012–2013 and declining thereafter.

Children Living in Households Below Poverty or Self-Sufficiency

Another important indicator of childhood food insecurity is the number of children living in households without enough income to afford sufficient nutritious food. While not all children living in poverty are food insecure, the relatively high cost of living in Montgomery County makes low household income a reliable indicator of potential food insecurity. When considering household income, there are two particularly important measures: the Federal Poverty Level, which is calculated as a national standard, and the Self-Sufficiency Standard, which is calculated to consider Montgomery County's relatively high cost of living.

The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a measure used to determine eligibility for certain federal programs and benefits; the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) uses 130% of the FPL as a cutoff for program eligibility, while the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) use 185% of the FPL as their cutoff. For 2022, the FPL for a family of four in the lower 48 states is \$27,750, making 130% of FPL \$36,075 and 185% of FPL \$51,337.50.^[20] In 2021, there were approximately 36,000 children living in households with income below 130% of the FPL, and 52,000 in households below 185% of the FPL.^[21]

The Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) defines “the amount of income required for working families to meet basic needs at a minimally adequate level, taking into account family composition, ages of children, and geographic differences in costs.”^[22] The SSS varies by family composition and local cost of living. For the most common family compositions, the SSS is around 400% of the FPL or \$111,000.^[23] It is important to consider the SSS because, while not a strict measure of food insecurity, it does give an indication of how many children live in households that do not have enough money to purchase basic needs, including food. In 2021, there were roughly 110,000 children living in households with income below 400% of the FPL, with more than 57,000 of those children living in households making too much money^[24] to receive assistance from the NSLP (yellow band in Figure 3) and 77,000 in households making too much to receive SNAP (yellow and orange bands in Figure 3).^[25]



Figure 10: Number of children in Montgomery County by household income relative to the Federal Poverty Level (2016–2021). Each bar is divided into four segments: below 130% of FPL (red), 130–185% of FPL (orange), 185–400% of FPL (yellow), and above 400% of

FPL (gray). Values shown within segments indicate the number of children in each income category for the given year. *** [^20]: Source citation as listed in the report. [^21]: Source citation as listed in the report. [^22]: Source citation as listed in the report. [^23]: Source citation as listed in the report. [^24]: Source citation as listed in the report. [^25]: Source citation as listed in the report.

Where Children Live

Household Income Relative to Poverty Level

All Kids 0 3,129

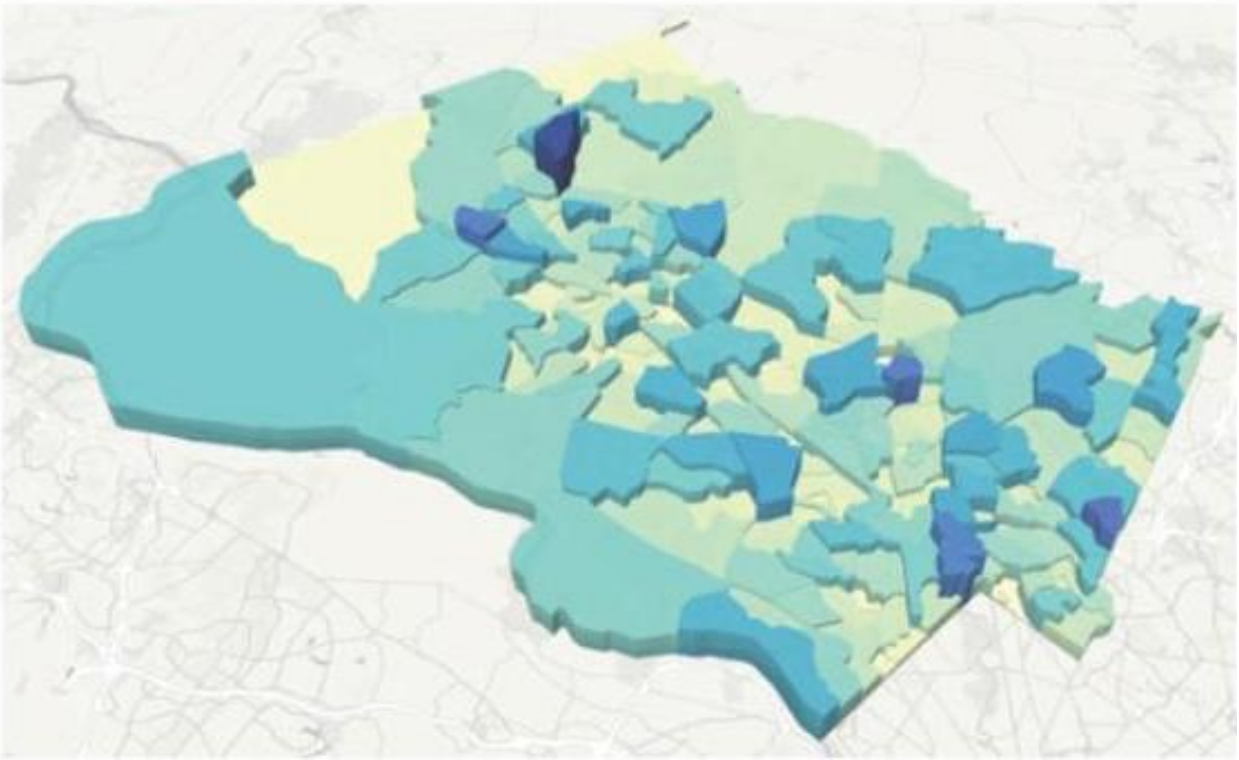


Figure 11: Geographic distribution of all children in Montgomery County by census tract. Darker blue areas indicate higher concentrations of children, while lighter yellow areas indicate lower concentrations. The legend ranges from 0 to 3,129 children.

Kids in Households Under 400% of Poverty Level 0 2,253

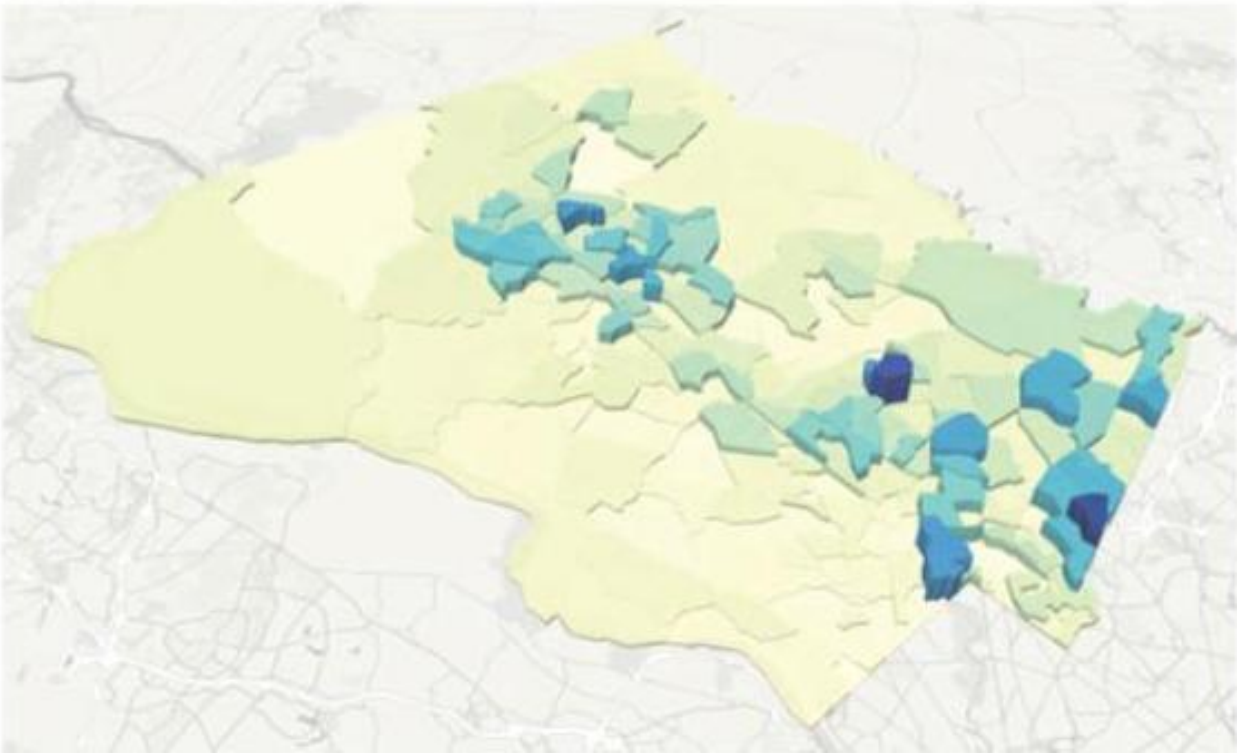


Figure 12: Distribution of children living in households below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Darker shades represent higher concentrations (legend range 0 to 2,253). Higher concentrations appear clustered in the eastern and southeastern portions of the county.

Kids in Households Under 185% of Poverty Level 0 1752

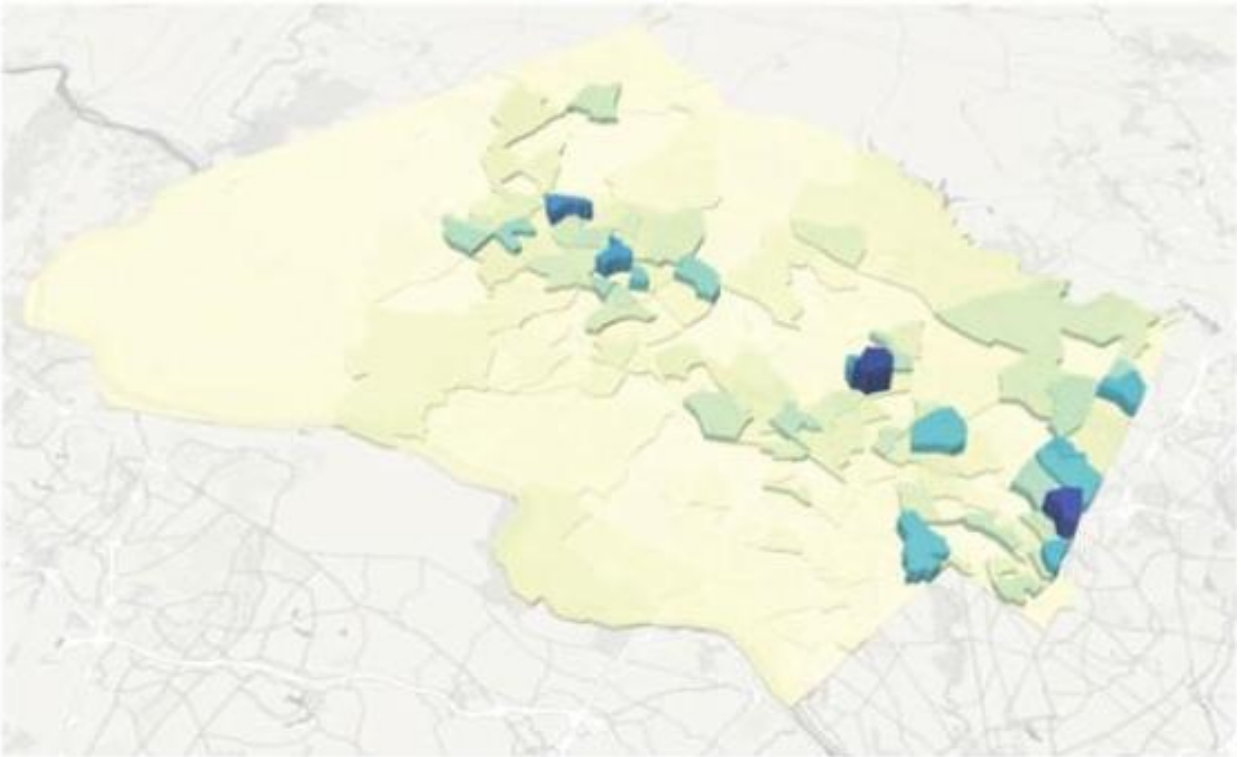


Figure 13: Distribution of children living in households below 185% of the FPL. Darker blue tracts (legend range 0 to 1,752) are concentrated primarily in eastern and southeastern areas, with fewer high-density tracts in western regions.

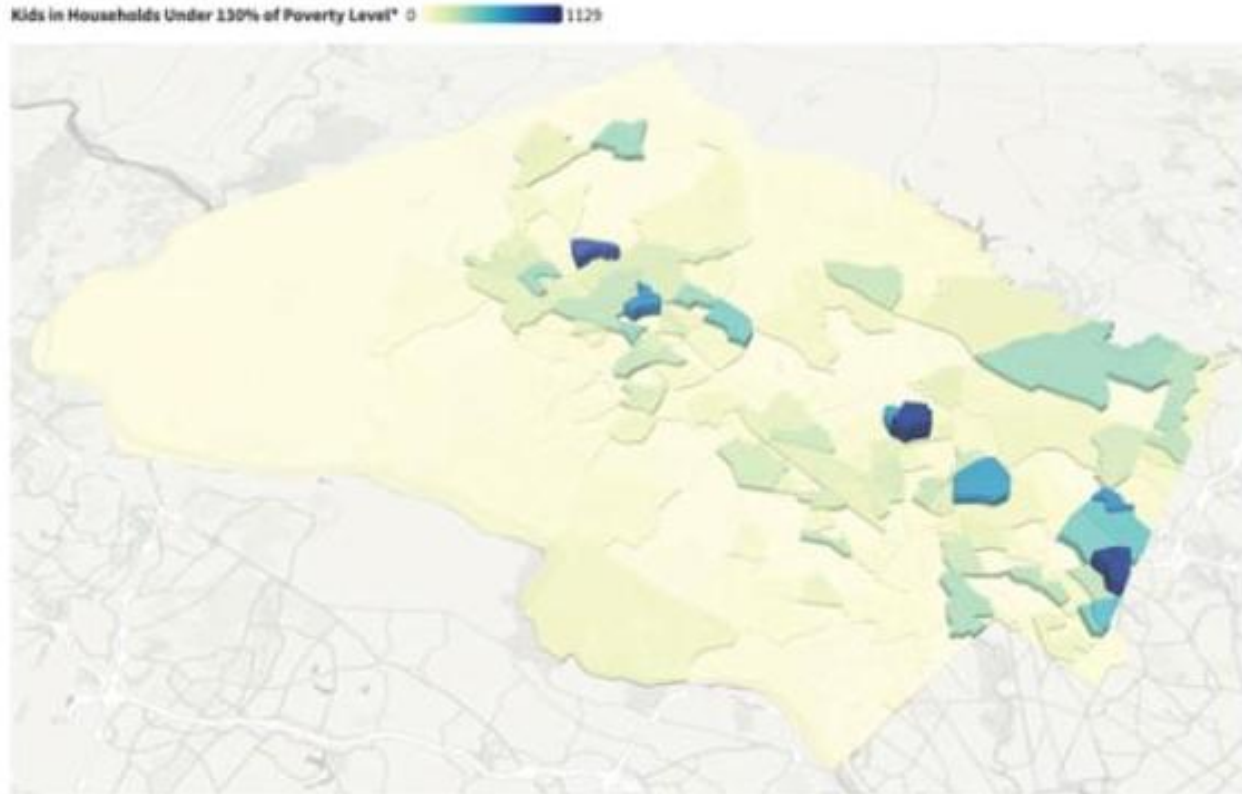


Figure 14: Distribution of children living in households below 130% of the FPL. The legend ranges from 0 to 1,129 children. Higher concentrations are limited to specific clusters, predominantly in the eastern and southeastern sections of the county.

Considering Geography

It is also important to consider where children within each household income level live when considering strategic investment. Many parents report transportation as a critical roadblock to receiving assistance, so it is important to consider the location of support services and outreach efforts geographically. Figure 14 shows where children live by household income relative to the FPL.

Special attention should be paid to those children in households whose incomes are too high to qualify for most federal assistance (i.e., with household incomes greater than 130% of the FPL), but are below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) (i.e., with household incomes around 400% of FPL for Montgomery County). According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly 36,000 children fall into this group.¹ The geographic distribution of those children is presented in Figure 15. This population of children live in households that may not have enough money to meet basic needs consistently, despite earning above eligibility thresholds for many assistance programs.

¹U.S. Census Bureau estimate of children in households with incomes between 130% and 400% of the Federal Poverty Level in Montgomery County.

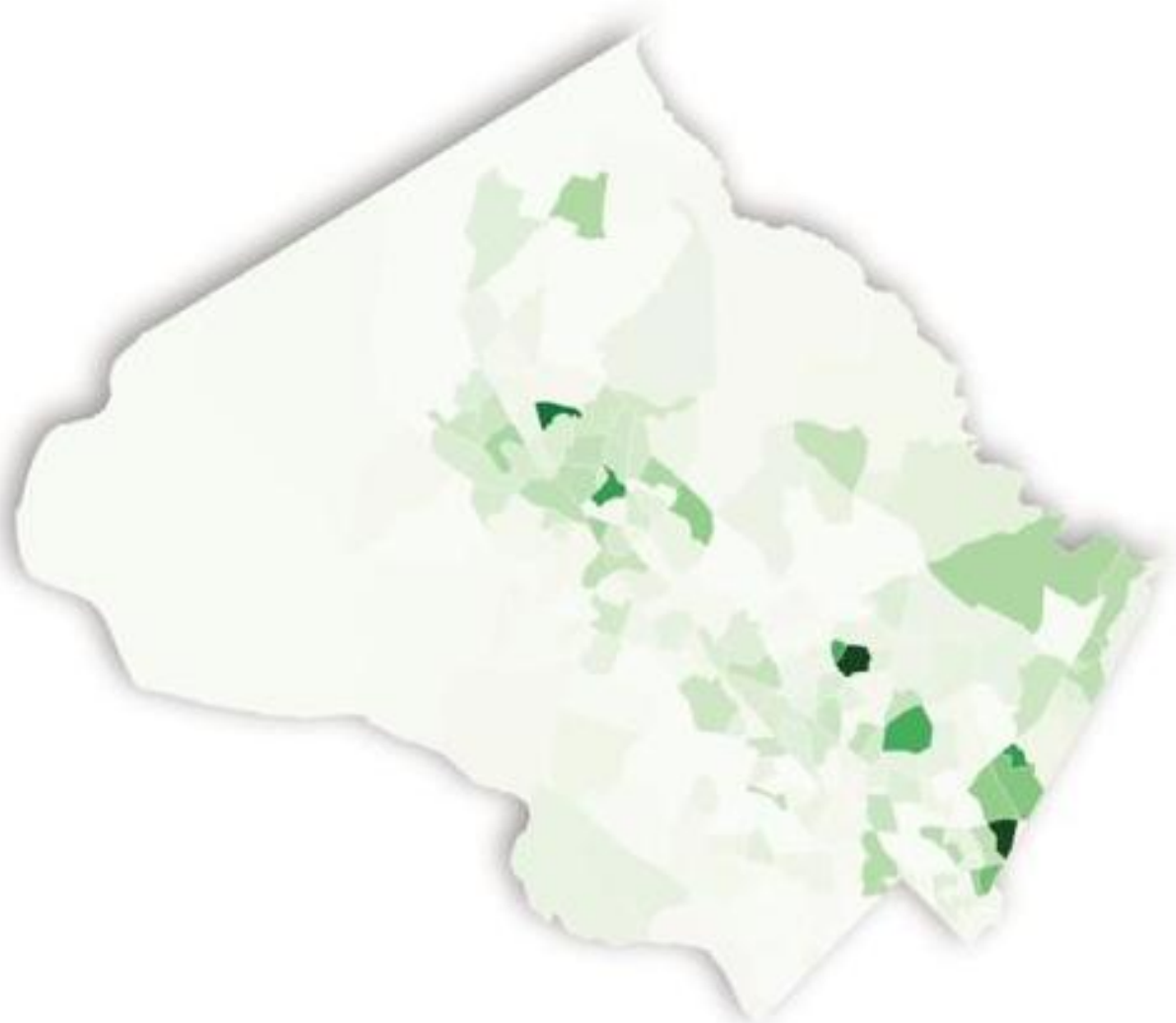


Figure 15: Children in households with incomes between 130% and 400% of the Federal Poverty Level. Darker green areas indicate higher concentrations of children who have too much income to qualify for SNAP but earn less than the Self-Sufficiency Standard.

Source (Figure 15): U.S. Census Data, 2020-812.1: Non-Takimate Detailed Table 61/1524. Census does not report specifically on 130% of poverty level; this estimate is calculated as those below 120% plus 20% of those below 150%.

Children by Age and Household Income Relative to Poverty Level Montgomery County, US Census Data

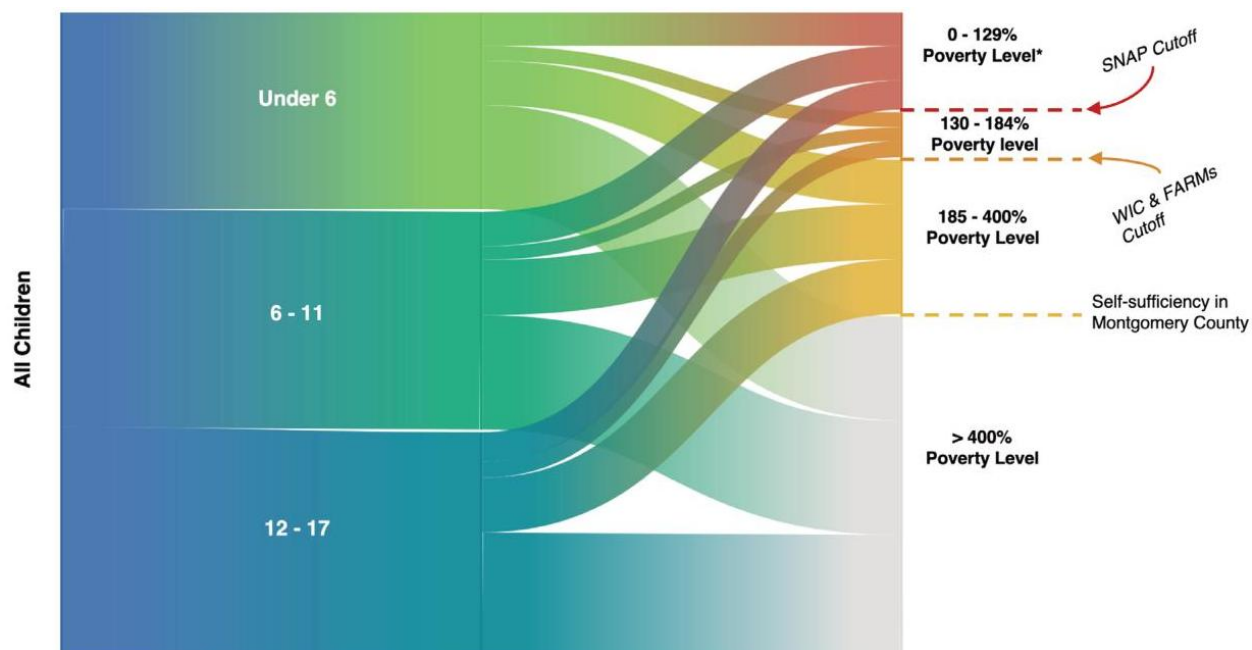


Figure 16: Children in Montgomery County by age group (Under 6, 6–11, and 12–17) distributed across household income levels relative to the federal poverty level. The diagram uses proportional flow bands to show how each age group is distributed across four income categories: 0–129% of poverty level, 130–184% of poverty level, 185–400% of poverty level, and above 400% of poverty level. Dashed reference lines indicate the SNAP cutoff (near 130% of poverty), the WIC & FARMS cutoff (near 185% of poverty), and the Self-Sufficiency Standard in Montgomery County. Band widths are proportional to the number of children in each income category.

Source: US Census Data, 2021: ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables.

The Census does not report specifically on 130% of the poverty level; this estimate is calculated as those below 125% plus 20% of those below 150%.

support healthy diets and meet their other needs—but are not eligible for programs like SNAP, WIC, and free school meals. The distribution of the ages of these children is visualized in the yellow band in Figure 6.

Considering Age

It is also important to consider the age of the children at each household income level when considering strategic investment. Within households below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS), school meals and other school-based interventions can be a good way to reach the more than 75,000 school-aged children. To reach the over 34,000 children below age 6 in this group, different approaches will be needed.^[27]

Figure 6 maps children by age to each of these categories and to the relevant levels of income. The linear sections are drawn to scale in proportion to the size of each group and their respective level of household income.

Considering Race

Along with age and location, it is crucial to consider the racial disparity in childhood food insecurity.

While 4.5% of white children in Montgomery County are estimated to live in households with incomes below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), that same measure for Hispanic or Latino and Black children is over 14%. Similar to geography, poverty (and food insecurity) is not equally distributed throughout the community, and strategies addressing childhood hunger should directly address these disparities.

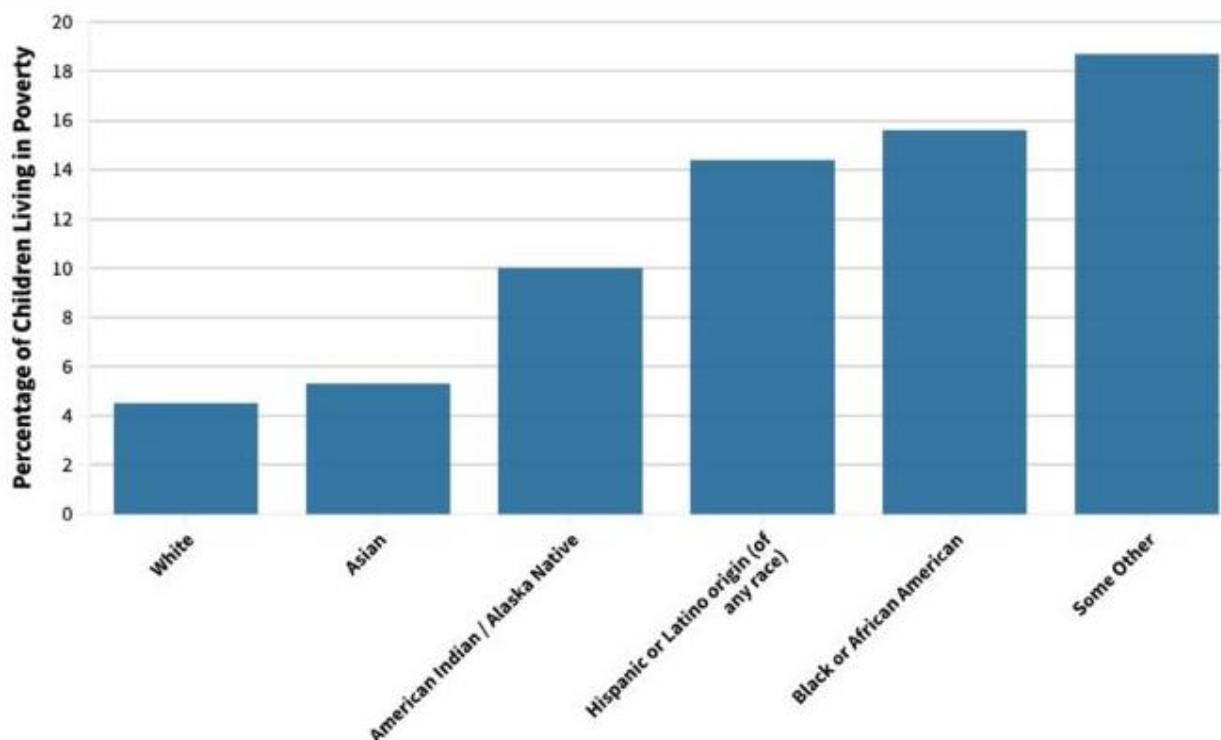


Figure 17: Percentage of Children Living in Poverty by Race

Note: All races include those reporting “alone or in combination.”

Source: U.S. Census Data, 2015 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Selected Population Detailed Tables.

Considering Languages Spoken

For any strategy to end food insecurity to be effective, it must reach all residents experiencing it, and in Montgomery County that means ensuring that the strategies take into consideration the many languages spoken in our diverse County. Among children in poverty aged 5–17, English and Spanish are the most common languages spoken at home, as represented in Figure 8. It is important to note that a significant number of children in poverty speak other languages as well.[29]

As one might expect, geographic analysis can also inform the language focus of strategies based on their location. The maps in Figure 9 show where children live, sorted according to the language they speak at home. This data should be used to tailor interventions to meet both the geographic and language needs of families experiencing food insecurity. Participants in the Spanish-speaking listening sessions shared that they felt discriminated against based on their ethnicity, inability to speak English, and lack of documents when applying for public food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC. They have found the lack of Spanish-speaking staff at government agencies and the disrespect they have experienced there to be a major barrier to accessing food assistance. Language access was a frequently cited barrier among participants in being able to fill out and ask questions about application forms.

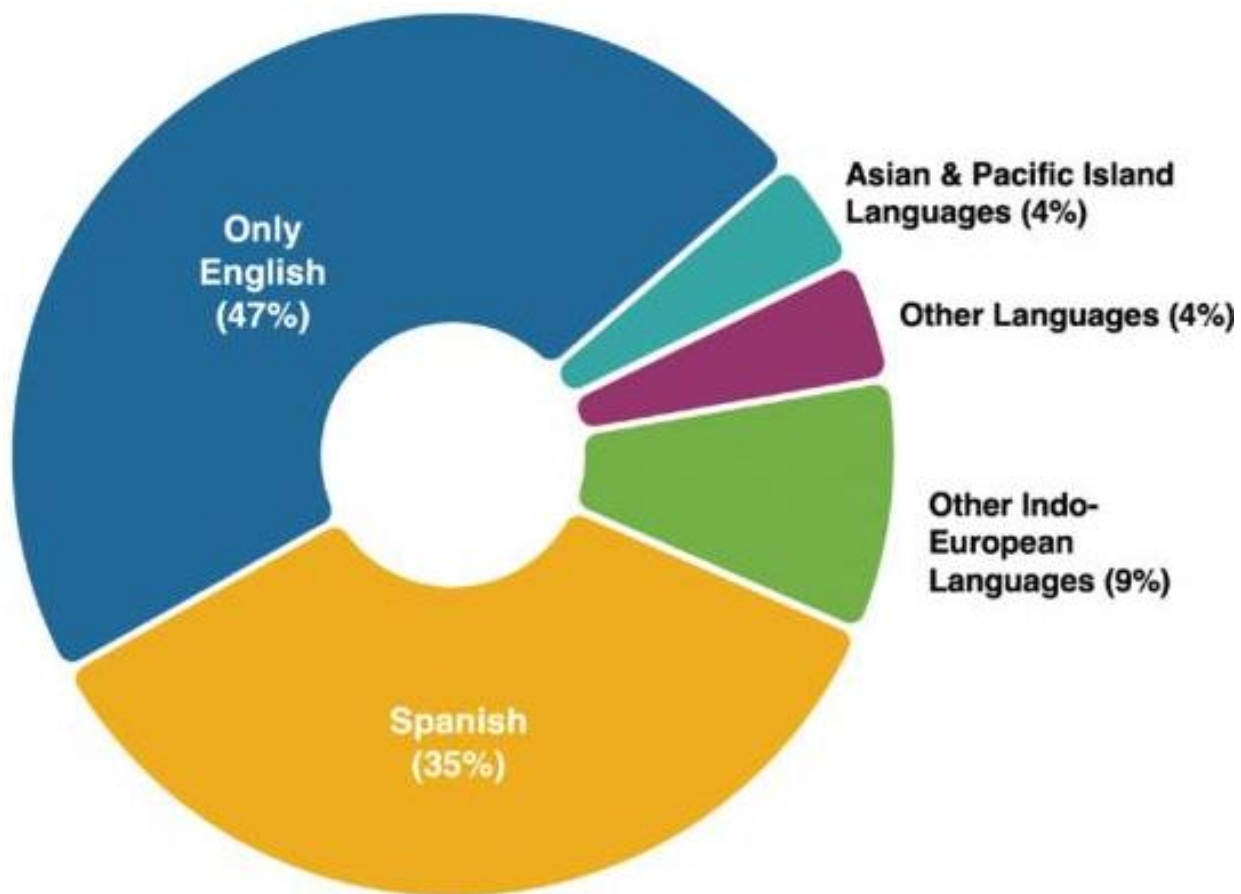


Figure 18: Language Spoken at Home for Children 5–17 in Poverty

Source: U.S. Census Data, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate, Detailed Table B18009.

Language Spoken at Home by Children 5–17 in Poverty



Figure 19: English Only — Geographic distribution of children ages 5–17 in poverty who speak only English at home. Darker red areas indicate higher concentrations across census tracts, with notable clustering in eastern and southeastern areas of the county.



Figure 20: Speak Spanish — Distribution of children ages 5–17 in poverty who speak Spanish at home. Higher concentrations appear in several central and eastern census tracts.

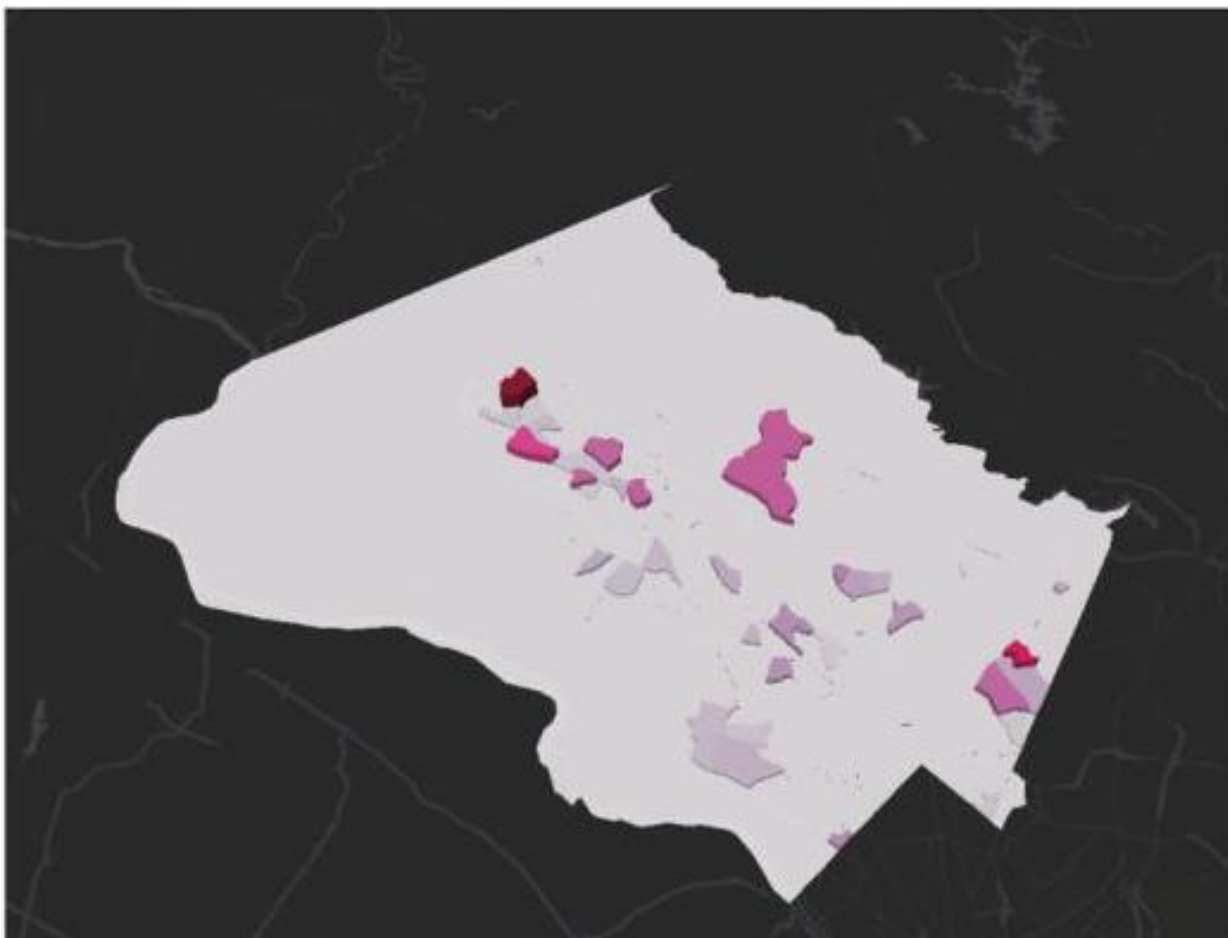


Figure 21: Speak Other Indo-European Languages — Distribution across census tracts, with scattered moderate concentrations and a few darker highlighted areas.



Figure 22: Speak Asian and Pacific Island Languages — Concentrations are limited to a small number of census tracts, with the highest values appearing in the eastern portion of the county.

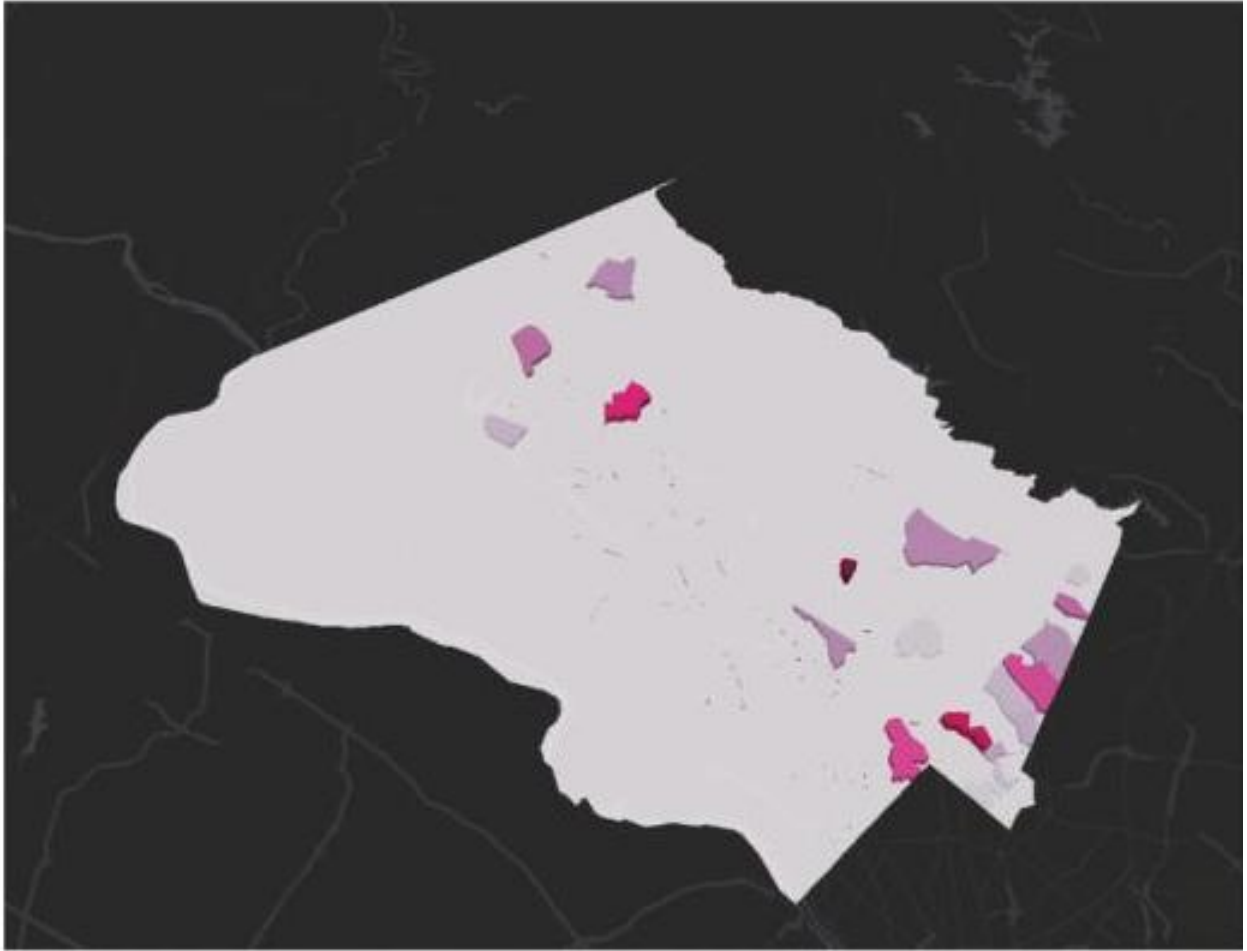


Figure 23: Speak Other Languages — Distribution of children ages 5–17 in poverty who speak languages other than English, Spanish, Indo-European, or Asian and Pacific Island languages, with higher concentrations in southeastern tracts.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2020). *American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates*, Detailed Table B16009.

Assistance Program Data

According to data collected from the 2020 US Census, an estimated 13% of children in Montgomery County live in households that have received Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Cash Public Assistance Income, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) support in the past 12 months.¹ Figure 10 shows where these approximately 32,000 children live.

According to Maryland Department of Health's WIC Office, 16,340 children and 12,901 women participated in WIC each month on average in 2021 in Montgomery County. US Census data estimates there are 65,340 children under 6, meaning that roughly 25% of children under 5 in the County are participating in WIC.

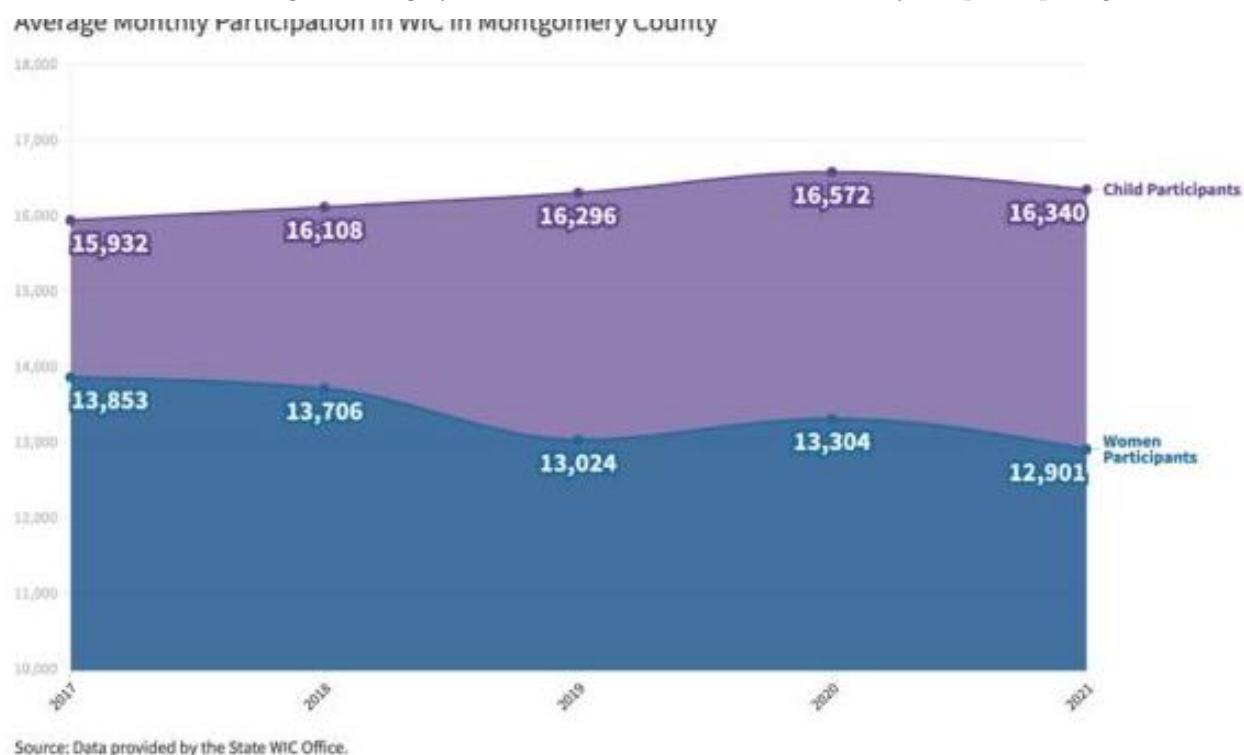


Figure 11: Average Monthly Participation in WIC in Montgomery County. The chart displays trends from 2017 through 2021, showing a gradual increase in child participation and slight variation in women's participation over time. Source: Data provided by the State WIC Office.

¹Source citation referenced in the original document (full citation not provided on this page).

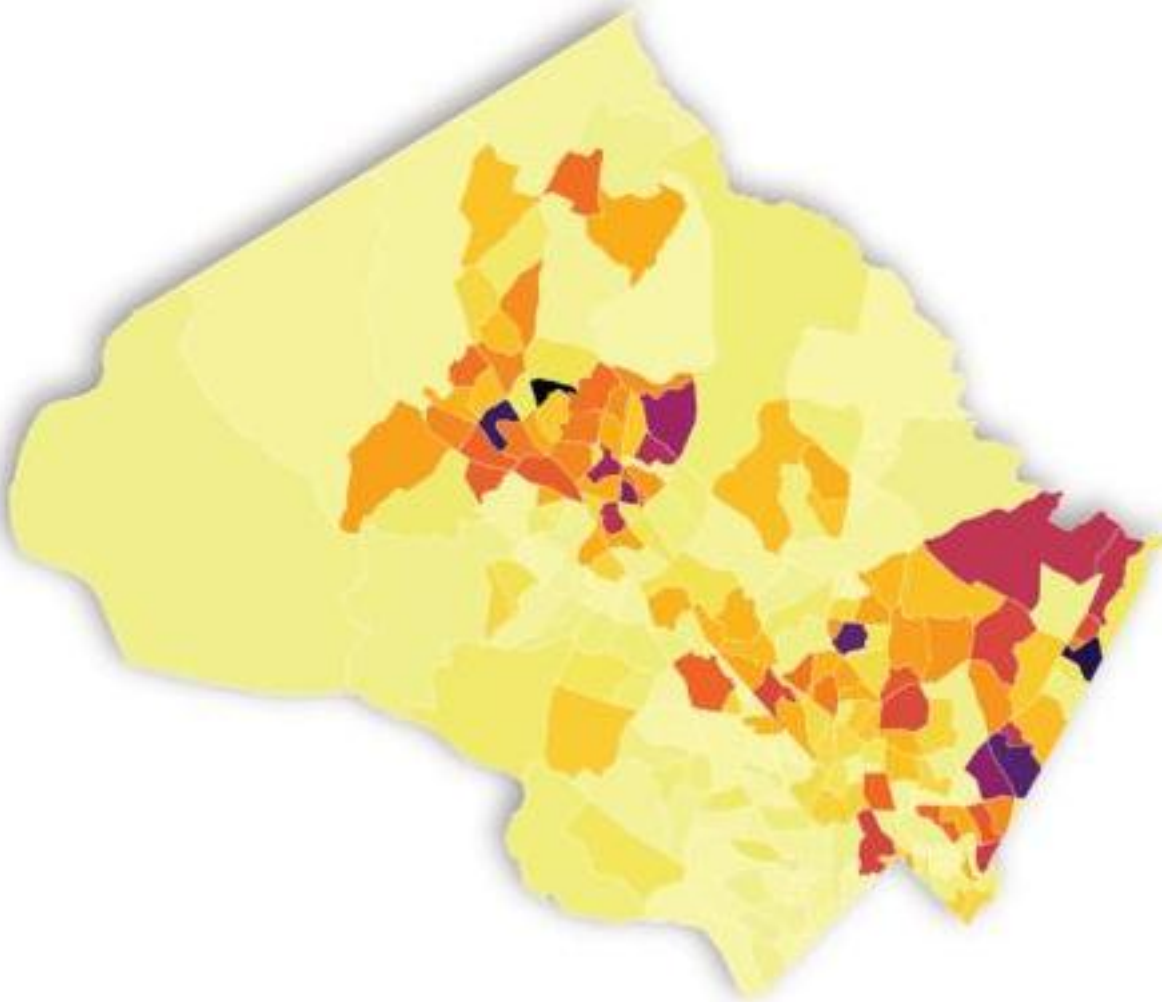


Figure 10: Children in Households Receiving Assistance — Receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Cash Public Assistance Income, or SNAP. Darker areas represent higher concentrations of children in households receiving assistance. Source: US Census Data, 2022–2023 Year Estimate Detailed Table 600012.

National School Lunch Program

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally funded assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to children each school day.² In Montgomery County, Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMs) are available to children in households whose income is below 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL). In Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in 2022, 70,348 children (43.56% of all enrolled) received FARMs.³ The State of Maryland passed the Kids Cares Act in 2018, which supplements federal funding to cover the reduced category student's cost for breakfast and lunch.

Caretakers are required to register the children annually for the program, so not every eligible child participates. To close this “FARMs gap,” MCPS participates in a program that allows them to directly certify children who are participating in other assistance programs, including SNAP and Head Start, without requiring their caretakers to complete enrollment paperwork. In 2022, MCPS joined a pilot program to directly

²Source citation referenced in the original document (full citation not provided on this page).

³Source citation referenced in the original document (full citation not provided on this page).

certify children on Medicaid to receive free or reduced meals. This new Medicaid direct certification process has made a striking difference—adding nearly 28,000 children to the school meals program.⁴ Direct certification, along with other MCPS FARMS enrollment efforts, are critical not only to serving eligible children in need, but also to taking advantage of key federal program provisions. Most notably, this includes the USDA’s Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

⁴Source citation referenced in the original document (full citation not provided on this page).

CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as SNAP and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).¹

The increase in directly certified students will translate to additional schools that qualify for CEP. This increase in the number of participating schools will provide the opportunity for MCPS to provide meals to more students without the use of annual family applications. Looking forward, this should help MCPS use federal dollars to provide more FARMs, which will directly help address childhood hunger.

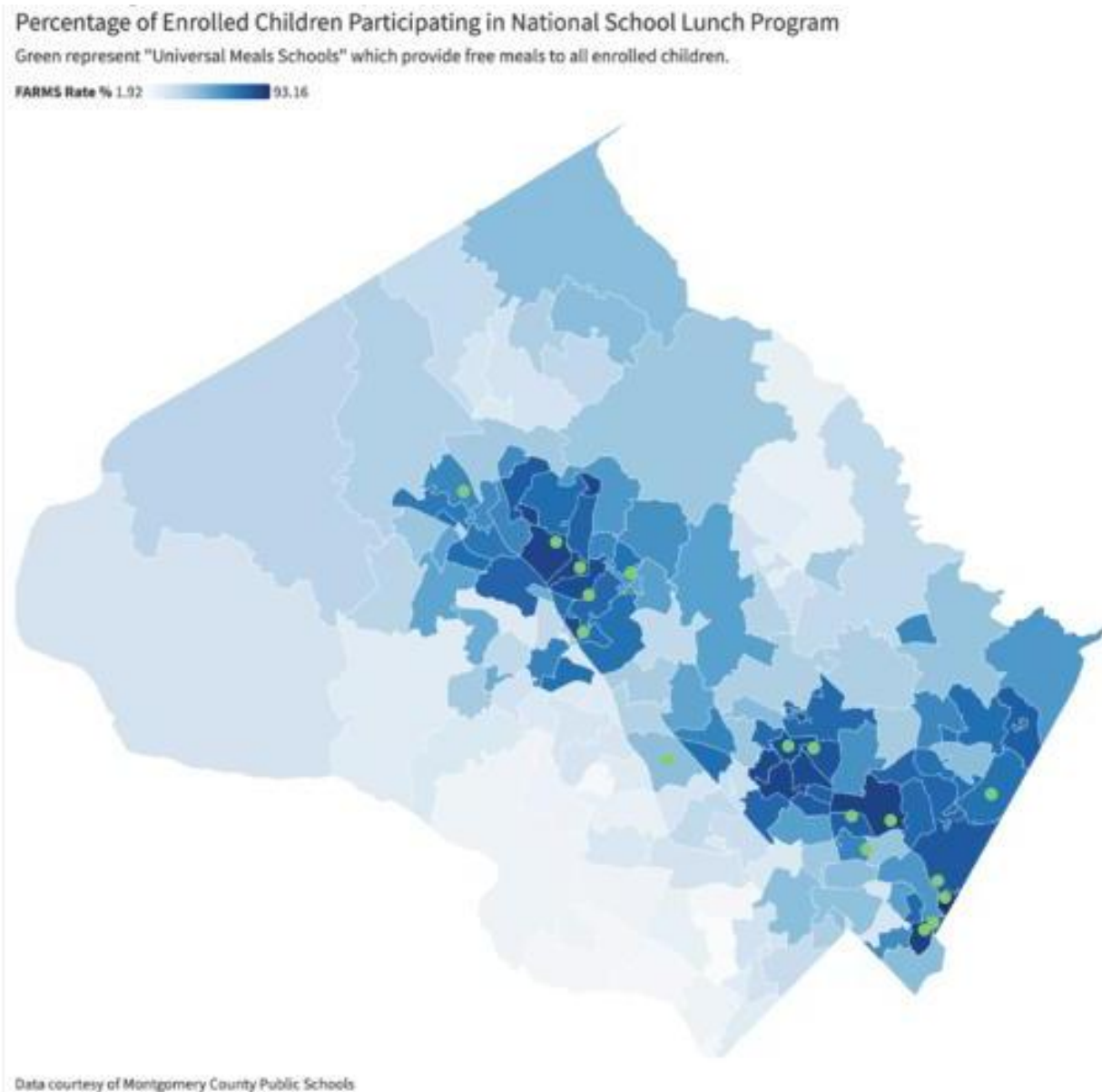


Figure 26: Percentage of enrolled children participating in the National School Lunch Program across Montgomery County. Darker blue shading represents higher FARMs rates (approximately 1.5% to 93.2%), and green dots indicate schools providing universal meals. Data courtesy of Montgomery County Public Schools.

¹Citation as provided in source document.

Maryland Meals for Achievement

The Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) program “provides state funds to allow participating schools to implement free breakfast in the classroom.”² Currently, 91 schools participate in the MMFA program in Montgomery County, with 58,838 students receiving free breakfasts every school day under this program.³ Participation in MMFA is determined by the State, but generally “a school is eligible when at least 40 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.”⁴ Based on MCPS 2022 FARMs rate data, there are 26 schools that have a FARMs rate above 40 percent but are not currently MMFA schools. If these schools were added to MMFA, an additional 28,286 children would be eligible for free in-classroom breakfast.⁵

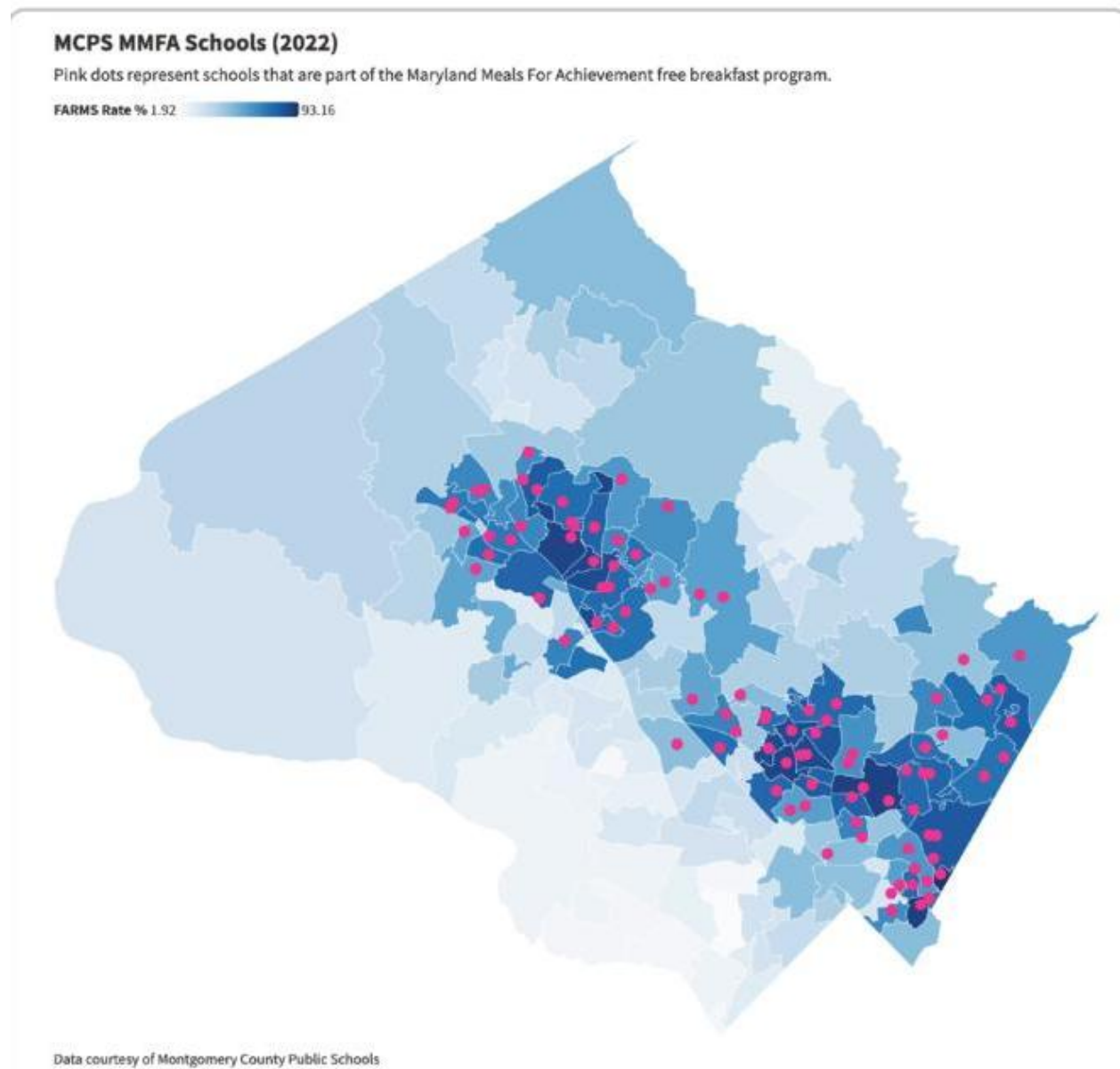


Figure 27: MCPS MMFA Schools (2022). Blue shading indicates FARMs rates by area (approximately 1.5% to 93.2%), and pink dots represent schools participating in the Maryland Meals for Achievement free breakfast program. Data courtesy of Montgomery County Public

²Citation as provided in source document.

³Citation as provided in source document.

⁴Citation as provided in source document.

⁵Citation as provided in source document.

Schools.

Strategies to End Childhood Hunger

The Montgomery County Food Council interviewed over a hundred local subject matter experts to develop a collection of proposed strategies to end childhood hunger in Montgomery County. Each of the sections below represents the fruits of that labor. They are organized into three groups based on how they address childhood food insecurity:

1. With direct financial benefits to purchase food;
2. With food provided at school, pre-school, or daycare; and
3. With novel approaches.

Each of these groups is detailed in a dedicated section that follows.

Table 1: Proposed Strategies to End Childhood Hunger by Category

Direct Financial Benefits	School & Childcare Adjacent Food Assistance	Novel Approaches & New Pathways
Expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs	Expansion of Free School Meals	Direct-to-Household Food Assistance
Address Benefit Inadequacy, Especially During the Summer	Expansion of Child and Adult Care Food Program	Improved Data-driven Decision Making
Provide Direct Benefits to SNAP Ineligible Households	Expand Early Head Start, Head Start, and Pre-K	Food Is Medicine
—	Community School Distributions and Pantries	Caretaker Nutritional Training
—	Expansion of Weekend Bags	Financial Literacy Training and Education
—	—	Gardening Grant Program

Areas for advocacy have also been identified, and are detailed in a section that follows the individual strategy descriptions.

Considering Scale, Complexity, and Impact

The strategies in this plan vary significantly in scale, complexity, and impact. In order to give the reader a sense of these differences, the chart below divides the strategies into two general categories — “Big Ideas” and “Quicker Changes.”

Big Ideas

- Promise large systemic change.
- Time and resource intensive.
- Reach thousands of families.
- Impact extends beyond just food needs.

Quicker Changes

- Promise rapid assistance.
- Help address immediate needs.
- Build on existing programs.
- Less time and resource intensive.

Table: Comparison of Big Ideas and Quicker Changes Strategies

Big Ideas	Quicker Changes
Expansion of Free School Meals	Expansion of Child and Adult Care Food Program
Expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs	Community School Distributions and Pantries
Address Benefit Inadequacy, Especially During the Summer	Food Is Medicine
Provide Direct Benefits to SNAP Ineligible Households	Gardening Grant Program
Direct-to-Household Food Assistance	Caretaker Nutritional Training
Improved Data-Driven Decision Making	Financial Literacy Training and Education
—	Expand Early Head Start, Head Start, and Pre-K
—	Expansion of Weekend Bags

Strategies to End Childhood Hunger

Direct Financial Benefits

In Montgomery County, hunger is a buying power problem. Residents appreciate the assistance offered through community and school-based food distribution programs, yet they also shared concerns about the quality and cultural appropriateness of the products offered. Their preference (according to resident survey data) is to have increased food benefit amounts. This request is consistent with academic research and with the findings of the Montgomery Food Security Task Force that,

“Food distributions are often a ‘one-size-fits-none’ approach, where the food access provider (who is packing the food in pre-set boxes) and the County (who is buying some or all of the food) are in the position of making the meal planning choices for those in need. The individuals served are subjected to the trauma and indignity of waiting in a line (sometimes with their children, often outside, and almost always in front of neighbors and community members) only to be given a box of food that may not contain the things they can or want to eat, know how to cook, or want to serve to their family.”^[39]

Providing families with extra money to purchase the food they want, from their preferred local grocer or farmer’s market, is more dignified, convenient, and efficient. It also supports local businesses and contributes to a thriving local food economy. For these reasons, the subject matter experts and residents interviewed agreed that efforts to combat childhood hunger should focus on increasing the buying power of food insecure families.

The Unique Role of SNAP in Fighting Childhood Hunger

SNAP^[40] is the country’s first line of defense against hunger. “SNAP provides benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families via an Electronic Benefits Transfer card. This card can be used like a debit card to purchase eligible food in authorized retail food stores.”^[41] SNAP is critical to Montgomery County’s efforts because it is the primary pathway to significant federal funding aimed at addressing food insecurity. SNAP beneficiaries receive a reliable, steady funding stream to purchase food at local commercial groceries. Unlike direct food assistance programs (such as food provided from food pantries), families enrolled in SNAP can rely on the SNAP funding they will receive and have the increased dignity of choosing where, when, and what foods they want to purchase. The impact on the local economy goes well beyond the families who receive help, as “each \$1.00 in federally funded SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity.”^[42] Increasingly, the federal government looks to SNAP expansion as a pillar of disaster response and poverty reduction, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic response^[43] and the recently released Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health^[44].

While SNAP and other direct benefit programs provide both financial and personal empowerment, they have three major shortcomings: *** ^[39]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

^[40]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

^[41]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

^[42]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

^[43]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

^[44]: Full citation text not provided in source excerpt.

- Enrolling for benefits is an arduous and complicated process that keeps many eligible families from ever getting enrolled;
- Benefits provided are often insufficient to meet the needs of food insecure families; and
- Program restrictions make many food insecure families ineligible to receive benefits.

The following sections will discuss these challenges as they relate to households with children, and consider potential solutions.

Strategies to End Childhood Hunger

Expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs

Proposal

Support the expansion of SNAP^[45] outreach through community-based organizations (CBOs) so that these organizations can perform more community outreach and training, as well as add enrollment experts to meet the overwhelming demand for their services.

Additional benefits outreach and training on eligibility screening and referral pathways would be provided to the wide variety of existing frontline social workers, counselors, teachers, food access providers, and others who interact with food-insecure children. These individuals are in a position to identify childhood food insecurity but often do not know which benefit programs might be able to help, or how and when to make SNAP or WIC enrollment referrals. Outreach and training would be offered to individuals working in trusted community spaces such as MCPS Community Schools, Montgomery County Food Assistance Hubs, recreation centers, after-school child care programs, and other places where trusted individuals are likely to encounter food-insecure children. The Montgomery County Food Council is well positioned to create a new “umbrella” program to engage non-CBO organizations with deep community ties.

Additional SNAP enrollment experts are needed to help cope with the overwhelming demand for SNAP enrollment assistance. CBOs are in a unique position to handle SNAP enrollment referrals but currently lack the capacity to reach and assist all those who need help, let alone the additional demand for their services that new outreach efforts will create.

Direct Financial Benefits

SNAP Enrollment Expansion

Background SNAP is the first line of defense against hunger, but many eligible residents are not receiving benefits to which they are entitled.

Proposal Expansion of community-based organizations to add SNAP enrollment experts to meet the overwhelming demand for their services.

Impact SNAP enrollment support for 2,000 children.

Medium Cost \$300,000 per year.

Background

Importance of SNAP in Fighting Childhood Hunger

Many children in Montgomery County who are eligible for SNAP are not enrolled in the program. Even more frustrating, many eligible families who were already enrolled in SNAP are being dropped from the program as a result of a complicated recertification process that was paused during the COVID-19 response but is now back in full effect.¹ These families are missing out on critical, reliable federal funding and, in doing so, are suffering needlessly while placing additional stress on other (often less well-funded) food assistance programs and community organizations. According to Montgomery County’s Childhood Hunger Survey, uncertainty concerning ***^[45]: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

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¹Reference to the reinstated SNAP recertification requirements following the COVID-19 emergency response period.

the application, personal eligibility, and child eligibility were 3 of the top 4 reasons participants were not enrolled in benefit programs. Closing this “SNAP gap” among families should be a top priority in ending childhood hunger in Montgomery County.

Unique Role of CBOs

Applying for SNAP benefits is a confusing, time consuming process that (without assistance) requires English literacy, access to a computer, a working knowledge of the various state and local offices involved in the application process, an address to reliably receive U.S. mail, overcoming fear created by disinformation about “public charge,” and persistent follow-up. Many residents are unsure who to turn to for help - with the most cited reason that kept them from asking for help from programs being, “I don’t know how to request help.”

Recognizing these significant barriers to SNAP enrollment, the State of Maryland Department of Human Services has trained and authorized special Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to assist people with applying for SNAP benefits. CBOs are able to provide a greater level of service to clients because of their access to the application systems and the relationship they have cultivated locally with the Office of Eligibility and Support Service. There are only three Montgomery County based CBOs: Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. – Immigrant Support Services; Manna Food Center; and the Montgomery County Food Council.¹ These CBOs are reimbursed 50% by the State, so County spending to expand local CBOs is effectively matched with State dollars.

CBOs do amazing work, but they face two major challenges: outreach and staffing. First, while CBOs have the technical expertise to help clients successfully navigate the SNAP process, they are not often in the best position to identify the population of children who are eligible but not enrolled in SNAP. Rather, it is the trusted counselors, case workers, social workers, teachers, coaches, and others who work directly with the children and their families that can better assess food insecurity and other needed social services. Educating these trusted individuals on the basic eligibility requirements for nutrition benefit programs will help them to identify those families that may benefit from SNAP enrollment and create a referral pipeline to the CBOs. Equally important, therefore, is training frontline case workers on how to make a “warm hand-off” to the benefit experts at a SNAP CBO, WIC office, and/or other organization that is able to provide assistance.

Second, CBOs are currently understaffed and struggle to meet the demand of those already seeking their help. The Montgomery County Food Council reports that, without extensive outreach, they have received more than 400 referrals from MCPS alone in the past year, and have had to manage that workload with only two full time staff members working on SNAP enrollment support. A successful outreach and training effort should result in a significant increase in referrals, and additional enrollment staff will be needed to meet that demand.

To address both of these challenges, CBO work needs to be expanded. A reasonable expansion of CBO efforts would be the addition of one full time position dedicated to outreach and training, along with five full time positions dedicated to enrollment assistance. These new enrollment experts will need to add language capacity in Spanish and Amharic at a minimum.

STRATEGIES TO END CHILDHOOD HUNGER

Cost

An expansion of a local Community-Based Organization (CBO)’s efforts to include the addition of one position dedicated to outreach and training, along with five full-time positions dedicated to enrollment assistance, is likely to cost approximately \$300,000 per year.[^52] Additional costs may be incurred to establish new (or to better leverage existing) referral mechanisms and develop training and outreach materials. CBOs are reimbursed 50% by the State, so County spending to expand local CBOs is effectively matched with State dollars.

Impact

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the country’s first line of defense against hunger and the best way to link food-insecure families with reliable funding to buy healthy foods. SNAP enrollment also automatically qualifies children for free meals at school[^53] or daycare.[^54] Also worth noting is the positive local economic impact of bringing additional federal support dollars into the County:

“Each \$1.00 in federally funded SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity.”[^55]

The number of SNAP-eligible children missing out on SNAP benefits is difficult to measure, but the current demand for SNAP enrollment assistance at CBOs indicates there are likely thousands of these children in Montgomery County.[^56] SNAP enrollment may not fully address those children’s food insecurity, but it is the most equitable and most cost-effective place to start.

Champions

Montgomery County-based CBOs would be the main champions of this effort, which would be funded in part by the County and in part by the State. The Montgomery County Food Council is well-positioned to create a new “umbrella” program to engage organizations with deep community ties. All local SNAP-focused CBOs, however, would need to be involved for a program of this nature to be successful. *** [^52]: Source citation for estimated annual expansion cost. [^53]: Source citation for automatic qualification for free school meals. [^54]: Source citation for automatic qualification for free daycare meals. [^55]: Source citation for economic impact multiplier of SNAP benefits. [^56]: Source citation for estimate of SNAP-eligible children in Montgomery County.

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Address Benefit Inadequacy, Especially During the Summer

Proposal

Providing food insecure households with children with extra money to purchase the food they want from the local grocer they prefer is the most dignified, equitable, and efficient way to support them. While this additional support would be helpful year-round, the need is particularly acute for families when school is not in session, making the continued expansion of Maryland Summer SNAP program particularly important.

Background

Unfortunately, while many families receive direct benefits (like SNAP or WIC), these benefits are often insufficient to cover their actual needs.⁵⁷ According to the Food Research and Action Center,

“The greatest shortcoming of SNAP is that benefits for most households are not enough to get through the entire month without hunger or being forced to sacrifice nutrition quality. This limitation persists even in the face of overwhelming evidence on the gains from more adequate monthly SNAP benefits.”⁵⁸

This is confirmed by the Montgomery County Resident Survey; the Survey found that, among respondents (n = 1,315), 63% used both food assistance programs (e.g., food distribution and food benefit). For many residents, food benefits alone do not meet their needs. For families with children, this need is particularly acute during the summer and winter school breaks when school-aged children are not receiving free school meals. Two recent programs have been created to fill this gap, one continuing program at the state level, and one temporary COVID-19 response program at the federal level. Both are detailed below, and each can serve as a model for Montgomery County to close the benefits inadequacy gap for families with children.

- **Impact:** \$100–\$500 per summer for 70,000 children
- **High Cost:** \$300,000–\$30 million per year

Maryland Summer SNAP

The 2019 Summer SNAP for Children Act⁵⁹ aimed to close the inadequacy gap by ensuring children have access to the nutrition they need when school is out of session during the summer and winter breaks. Maryland Summer SNAP for Children provides a \$30 monthly cash benefit for food during the summer months and \$10 during winter break to reduce food insecurity and improve the diets of low-income children. The Maryland Department of Human Services’ Family Investment Administration ad

ministers Summer SNAP. State law requires that local jurisdictions apply to participate in Summer SNAP and agree to contribute local funds. Presently, Montgomery County has \$100,000 in the base budget and plans to continue to support the Summer SNAP Program and to increase the funding each year based on availability of funds.

Table 1: Summer SNAP Participation for the Past 3 Years^[60]

20–21	\$228,300	\$46,410	\$181,890	1,818 – TCA school-age
21–22	\$167,200	\$27,200	\$140,000	1,672 – TCA school-age (4–17)
22–23	\$781,400	\$453,600	\$327,800	7,813 – TCA school-age (5–15) & 7 highest SNAP zip codes (20874, 20877, 20878, 20886, 20904, 20906, 20910)

Federal Pandemic EBT

During COVID, the federal government implemented the Pandemic EBT program, which provided funds to families with children that would have received free or reduced-price school meals had schools not closed as part of the pandemic response.^[61] In Maryland, the total summer PEBT benefit was \$391 per child.^[62] This extra funding has been cited as a possible reason why the “rate of food insecurity among households with children declined [nationally] in 2021 despite unemployment rates remaining above pre-pandemic levels and the rising cost of food and other basic necessities.”^[63] Analysis has shown that Pandemic EBT had a major positive impact on families, lifting millions of children out of hunger.^[64] Given the success of these programs, Congress is considering creating a permanent \$75 per month Summer EBT benefit.^[65]

The Role of Montgomery County

While State and Federal programs expanding food benefits are significantly impactful (and the County should continue to advocate for their continuation and expansion), these programs do not fully account for the relatively high cost of living in Montgomery County. Moreover, with the pandemic ending, critical federal support is disappearing. The County should consider providing direct financial support to families to purchase food. While this additional support would be helpful year-round, the need is most acute for families when school is not in session. Such a program could be modeled on Summer SNAP and Pandemic EBT, both of which provided benefits to all children receiving FARMs. *** ^[60]: Source citation for Summer SNAP participation data (as referenced in the original document). ^[61]: Source citation for implementation of the federal Pandemic EBT program. ^[62]: Source citation for Maryland summer PEBT benefit amount. ^[63]: Source citation for national food insecurity rate decline in 2021. ^[64]: Source citation for analysis of Pandemic EBT impact. ^[65]: Source citation regarding proposed permanent Summer EBT benefit.

Strategies to End Childhood Hunger – Cost, Impact, and Champions

Cost

The County share of supporting the Summer SNAP program for 2022–2023 will be \$327,800, of which \$100,000 is included in the base budget.

Funding an additional \$10 per week for the ten weeks of summer (\$100 total per year) for each of the 70,348 children receiving Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMs) benefits would cost \$7,034,800 per year.

For many families, SNAP benefits are not just insufficient during summer. To fund an additional \$10 per week year-round (\$520 total per year) for each of the 70,348 children receiving FARMs, the cost would be \$36,580,960 per year.

Impact

Maryland Summer SNAP is a partially state-funded food support program that works well, reaches a targeted audience, and will provide critically needed benefits to 7,813 children in 2023.

Pandemic EBT was transformative for families who received it, and a similar Montgomery County-funded initiative could be equally impactful. If this program were tailored to reach all children receiving FARMs during the regular school year, it would impact approximately 70,348 children.

Champions

The Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Food Systems Resilience should work together to champion this work.

Provide Direct Benefits to SNAP Ineligible Households

Proposal

Provide SNAP-equivalent benefits to children in low-income families in Montgomery County who are not eligible for state or federal food benefits.

Background

Some residents who are not U.S. citizens are not eligible for SNAP.^[66] Montgomery County has a history of providing support to families that are not eligible for state or federal benefit programs. For example, Montgomery County's Care for Kids program provides affordable primary, specialty, behavioral health, and dental care for nearly 6,000 children of low-income families in Montgomery County who are not eligible for other state or federal health insurance programs.^[67] It is likely that many of the nearly 6,000 children served by the Care for Kids program are food insecure but do not qualify for SNAP. Montgomery County should consider taking a similar approach to food insecurity and choose to support those children with direct financial benefits as well.

The creation of a program designed to make all low-income families in Montgomery County eligible to receive some form of direct food benefit assistance could have positive network effects on overall SNAP enrollment. SNAP enrollment experts indicated one of the main things preventing eligible residents from enrolling in SNAP is concern and confusion about immigration status.^[68] As proposed in another section, an expansion of SNAP enrollment CBOs can help close this gap. The creation of a program covering ineligible residents could help in this effort. Making it clear that all low-income food insecure families can receive help from either SNAP, or a Montgomery County program will encourage more individuals to seek help. As a result of this outreach, some, if not many, of those individuals will turn out to be SNAP eligible.

Program Summary

Background: Some households with children in Montgomery County do not qualify for SNAP but still struggle with food insecurity.

Proposal: Provide SNAP-equivalent benefits to children in low-income families in Montgomery County who are not eligible for other state or federal food benefits.

Impact: SNAP-equivalent benefits for approximately 6,000 children.

High cost: \$1.0M per year.

Cost

To be eligible for the Care for Kids program, a child must:^[69]

- Not be eligible for any state or federal insurance programs
- Be below 250% of the federal poverty level (FPL)
- Live in Montgomery County

Similar eligibility requirements are appropriate for addressing food insecurity. If similar requirements were put in place, then a similar number of participants, about 6,000 children, could be expected.

The average monthly SNAP benefit per person is around \$145 per month^[70] or \$1,740 per year. If those 6,000 children in Care for Kids (continued on next page) *** ^[66]:

^[67]:

^[68]:

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qualified for the benefit, that would be an annual cost of about \$10,440,000.^[71]

Food, somewhat unlike individual medical coverage, is a shared family commodity, as families share meals in a way they do not share dental care or eye exams. For this reason, the County should consider expanding food insecurity support to all of the members of a food insecure child's household. This could more than double the cost of the program; it would ensure, however, that food benefits are properly scaled to a household's actual need.

Impact

If similar eligibility requirements from the Care for Kids Program were put in place, then a similar number of participants, roughly 6000 children, could be expected.

Champions

The County would need to carefully consider who should administer this program, and should consider a community based organization^[72] that is already assisting with SNAP enrollment. The primary reason for this is that one of the goals in creating the program is to draw applicants who are SNAP eligible but are reluctant to apply for SNAP due to disinformation or confusion. Administering this program through a CBO would help ensure that families in need of help were assisted in the application process for any and all help they might qualify for, be it SNAP or a Montgomery County program. MCPS would be a crucial partner in identifying children who might be facing food insecurity but are not SNAP eligible.

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School and Childcare Adjacent Food Assistance

School, pre-school, childcare, and daycare facilities can play a unique role in reaching food insecure children with nutritious food. Below are strategies that leverage the unique and special role these places have in children's lives.

Expansion of Free School Meals

Proposal Provide free school meals to more children than are currently covered by the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)^[73], which provides Free and Reduced-Priced Meals (FARMs) to low-income students. Provide meals either to all students who live in households with incomes below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) or, alternatively, to all enrolled students.

Background The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system is in a unique position to provide children with direct food support. Nutritious meals are served daily to children across the entire MCPS network. This tremendous feeding effort is backed by a large nutritional staff and significant physical infrastructure, including kitchens, warehouses, and lunchrooms designed to meet the needs of the 161,503 enrolled students.

This unique capacity of schools to feed children during every school day has led the federal government to make free school meals a cornerstone of the national effort to reduce childhood hunger. The NSLP is a federally assisted meal program that provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches.^[74] In Montgomery County, FARMs are available to children in households whose income is below 185% of the federal poverty level. In MCPS in 2022, 70,348 children (43.56% of all enrolled students) received FARMs.^[75] The State of Maryland supplements federal funding to cover students' reduced cost for breakfast and lunch.^[76] Additionally, some "universal meals schools," with particularly high FARMs rates, provide free meals to all children in school regardless of household income. Together, these programs provide free meals to 71,547 MCPS students daily during the school year, making MCPS meals by far the largest direct food support hunger relief effort in the County. As part of the COVID-19 response, the federal government provided funding for school districts to make free meals available to all students.^[77] While universally free school meals are no

Impact: Free school meals for 3K–10K students

Cost: \$2M–\$12M per year

*** ^[73]: Citation details not provided on this page.

^[74]: Citation details not provided on this page.

^[75]: Citation details not provided on this page.

^[76]: Citation details not provided on this page.

^[77]: Citation details not provided on this page.

longer federally subsidized, COVID-19 showed that MCPS has the capacity to provide free school meals if sufficient funding is available.

Researchers argue that universal meal programs help address major shortcomings in the current system that limits free or reduced cost meals to those children in households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL):

[T]his means-tested approach excludes many resource-constrained families at risk of food insecurity who are near eligible for free or reduced-price meals but do not qualify. Further, some students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals do not participate due to stigma. Students may feel shame about receiving a free school meal or their parents/caregivers may be reluctant to complete the necessary paperwork because it denotes that they are from a low-income household. ... [Universal school meals] can reduce stigma; improve children's diet-quality; nourish students for the academic demands of the school day; and benefit schools by potentially lowering administrative costs and eliminating school meal debt from households with insufficient funds to pay for meals.[78]

The failure of a needs-based test tied to the too-low 185% of FPL is particularly hard felt in Montgomery County, where the cost of living is much higher than the national average. U.S. Census data estimates that there are 40,777 school-aged children in Montgomery County that are between 185% and 400% of FPL (a reasonable estimate of the SSS).[79] This is a significant population of children that live in homes that make too much income to qualify for FARMs, but not enough to be considered self-sufficient.[80]

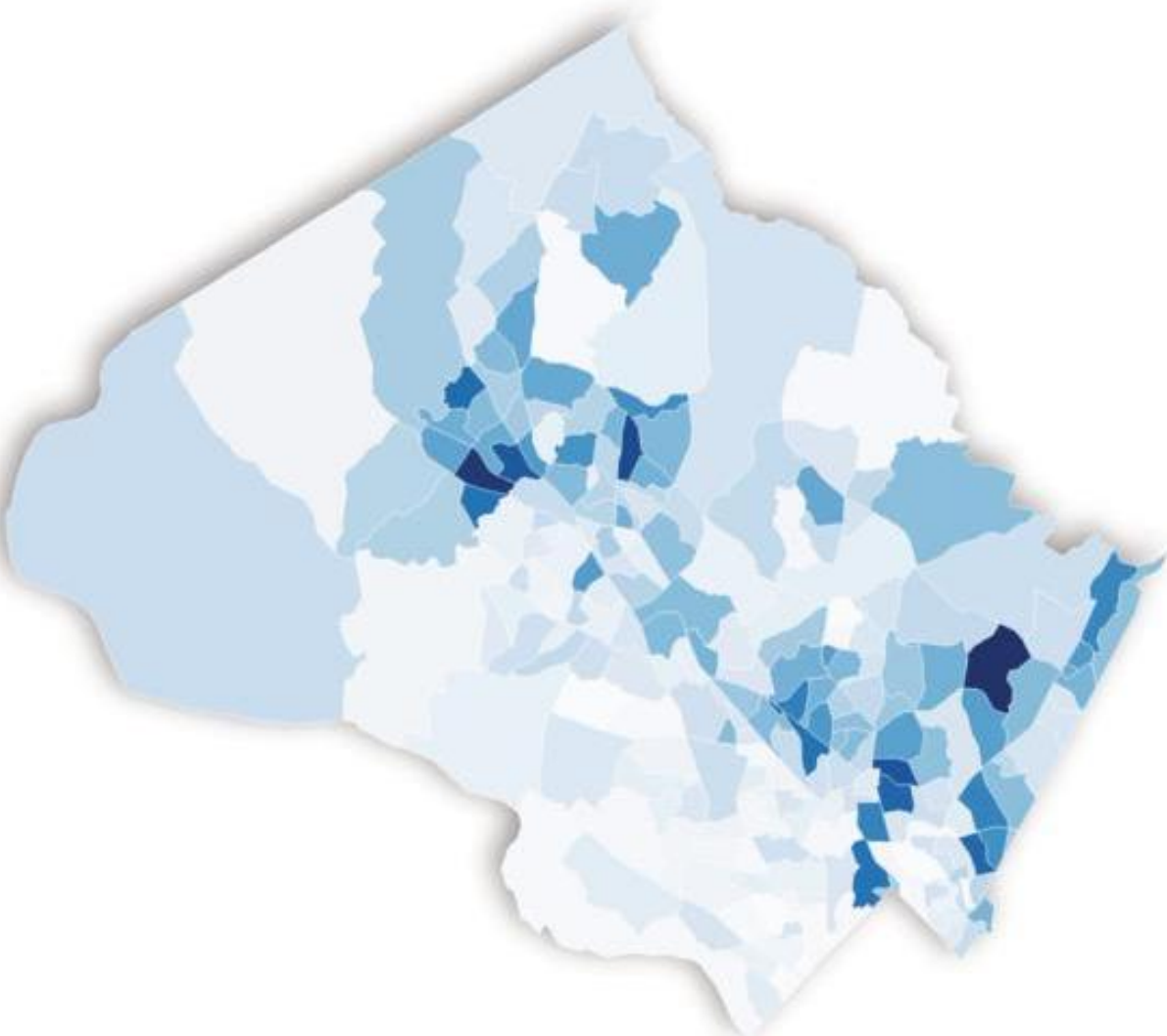


Figure 1: Too much income for FARMs, but less than self-sufficient. Children in households with income between 185% and 400% of FPL. Source: U.S. Census Data, 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate Detailed Table B17024.

The County could help address this issue in one of two ways. First, it could offer free school meals to all students living in households below the self-sufficiency level. This would help address the concern that many food insecure children live in households with incomes above the 185% level. Alternatively, the County could make school meals free for all students. This would not only address the too-low 185% of FPL bar, but also address concerns about stigma and school debt.

Continued Advocacy

The County should also continue to advocate at the state and federal level for the expansion of school meal programs. Post-COVID, the expansion of school meals programs is getting renewed national interest, and is featured as a core part of the recently released White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health.[81] In addition to advocating for more federal funding

for school meals, MCPS should take full advantage of existing programs like the Community Eligibility Provision^[82], which expands free lunch availability in schools that serve communities most in need.

The County should advocate at the state level for the expansion of the Maryland Meals For Achievement (MMFA) program. This program “provides state funds to allow participating schools to implement free breakfast in the classroom.”^[83] Currently, 91 schools participate in the MMFA program in Montgomery County, with 58,838 receiving free breakfasts every school day under this program.^[84]

Serving as examples, both Colorado and Maine have recently passed laws making free meals available to all students, regardless of their family’s income.^[85] These could serve as a potential model to Maryland and other states. Montgomery County should advocate for similar support for universal school meals at the state and federal level.

Cost and Impact

Option A – All Children in Households Below the Self-Sufficiency Standard

School meals could be provided for free to all children living in households with income below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS). Due to the relatively high cost of living in Montgomery County, there are many students who face food insecurity but are ineligible for FARMs due to their household income being above 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The SSS varies by family composition and local cost of living; for the most common family compositions, this is around 400% of the FPL or \$111,000 in Montgomery County.^[86]

According to 2021 Census estimates, approximately 75,532 children live in households that make less than 400% of the FPL in Montgomery County.^[87] Assuming that 97.77%^[88] of these children are enrolled in MCPS, approximately 73,848 children attend MCPS and are living in households that make less than 400% of FPL.^[89] According to 2022 MCPS data, 71,547 children already receive FARMs (either by being enrolled for FARMs or attending a universal meals school). This would mean approximately 2,301^[90] children are below estimates of self-sufficiency but not receiving free meals.

School lunches cost an estimated \$4.00 per meal. With 182 school days in the school year, the cost of providing free lunches to each additional student is around \$728.^[91] For the estimated 2,301 children in households below 400% of the FPL that are not currently receiving FARMs, this would cost \$1,675,178 per year.^[92] This option could also encourage more families to complete FARMs application forms, which could help increase the number of children receiving federally funded meals.

Option B – Universal Meals

School meals could be provided for free to all enrolled MCPS students. Currently, there are 161,503 students enrolled, with 71,547 already receiving free meals.^[93] The cost of providing meals to the other 89,956 children could be as much as \$65,487,968 per year^[94] if every student ate the provided meal every day; experience indicates that not all students will take free meals even if offered. During the 2021–2022 school year, COVID-era waivers from the USDA made free meals available to every MCPS student, effectively operating a sort of one-year universal free meals program pilot. During this time, MCPS reports serving approximately 3,000,000 extra meals at a cost of \$12,000,000 per year.^[95] This is a far better estimate of the actual cost of implement *** ^[82]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[83]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[84]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[85]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[86]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[87]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[88]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[89]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[90]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[91]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[92]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[93]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[94]: Source not provided in excerpt. ^[95]: Source not provided in excerpt.

Regarding universal free meals in Montgomery County, if the County pursues universal school meals, efforts should be made to ensure that as many children as possible remain enrolled in the federally funded school meals program. The County's goal should be to augment federal funding provided for meals with local funding, not to forgo federal funding altogether, which could happen if families stop completing federally required FARMs applications. Moreover, the "FARMs Rate" (the percentage of the student body in a school receiving federally funded school meals) is considered in a number of other social welfare and school support program calculations.

During COVID-19 (when universal school meals were offered), MCPS saw a significant drop in FARMs applications. If families no longer feel they need to apply for free school meals, it could lead to a significant drop in the "FARMs rate" at MCPS schools, which could in turn have a negative cascading impact by triggering a drop in many different forms of federal and state support offered only to high-FARMs-rate schools.

Champions

The County would be the funder, with MCPS preparing and providing the meals.

Expansion of Child and Adult Care Food Program

Proposal

Reverse the decrease of home daycares (sometimes referred to as “family child care homes”) by leveraging the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). This can be accomplished by ensuring that (1) all child care providers have access to computers to complete required paperwork; (2) newly enrolled providers receive sufficient support in menu planning and reporting; and (3) sufficient outreach is conducted to combat rumors and misconceptions about CACFP. Additional efforts should include helping care staff create culturally relevant menus and increasing outreach to CACFP-eligible child care centers.

Background

CACFP is a federal program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating child care centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers.[^96] In Montgomery County, CACFP for home daycares is administered by MCPS.[^97]

CACFP provides three levels of reimbursement based on a child’s household income level: “free” for children in households below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), “reduced” for children in households below 185% of FPL, and “paid” for all others.[^98] Home daycares receive \$5.37 per day per child at the “free” level if two meals are served (typically breakfast and lunch); a snack is also provided. The reimbursement amount is lower for children at the “reduced” level (\$2.58 per day per child) and the “paid” level (24 cents per day per child).[^99] Children in households participating in SNAP or the Temporary Cash Assistance Program are automatically (“categorically”) eligible for “free” status under CACFP.[^100] To be eligible for reimbursement under CACFP, for-profit daycare centers must show that more than 20% of enrolled children meet the criteria for “free” or “reduced” status.[^101]

There has been a dramatic decrease in the number of home daycares providing free meals to food-insecure children under CACFP. In Montgomery County, roughly 200 home daycares participated in CACFP in 2022, of which approximately 25% were eligible for “free” reimbursement status and 75% were eligible for “reduced” reimbursement status.[^102] This represents a substantial decline from the roughly 450 home daycares that participated in 2019.[^103]

Many home daycares that would be eligible to participate in CACFP are not currently enrolled. This is a major concern, given that CACFP is one of the primary pathways of federal funding to support childhood nutrition for children too young to attend school. Missing out on these federal dollars increases child care costs and reduces the capacity of providers to offer nutritious meals to food-insecure children.

Impact

Free daycare meals for 1.5K children.

Medium Cost

\$150K per year. *** [^96]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^97]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^98]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^99]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^100]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^101]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^102]: Source citation as referenced in original document. [^103]: Source citation as referenced in original document.

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Key Informant Interviews

CentroNía

- Cynthia Mercado

City of Gaithersburg

- Lesley MacDonald, Financial Empowerment Center

Clifton Park Baptist Church, Silver Spring Hub

- Randi Drewry

Critical Issues Forum

- Mitchell Glassman
- Steve Mandel

Department of Health and Human Services

- Aizat Oladapo, Community Action Agency
- Alyssa Sanders, Linkages to Learning
- Dira Treadvance, Children, Youth & Family Services

Food Research & Action Center

- Clarissa Hayes
- Allyson Perez

Greater Washington Community Foundation

- Joan Schaffer, Children's Opportunity Alliance

Maryland WIC

- Ernest Le

Montgomery County Council

- Essie McGuire
- Nicole Rodriguez

PLAN CREATION

Montgomery County Public Schools

- Amy Beal, Community Schools
- Kassie Cardona, Downcounty Student Support Services
- Everett Davis, Office of Student Support and Well Being
- Barbara Harral, Department of Food & Nutrition Services
- Michelle Kim, Department of Food & Nutrition Services
- Steve Neff, Office of Student Support and Well Being
- Mariann Rutherford, Department of Food & Nutrition Services
- Shaun Sawko, Department of Food & Nutrition Services

Maryland Hunger Solutions

- Julia Gross

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

- Lindsay Smith

Primary Care Coalition

- Stephanie Narayanan
- Marisol Ortiz

Share Our Strength, No Kid Hungry Maryland

- Ayesha Holmes

Sheppard Pratt

- Jody Burghardt, Early Head Start

University of Maryland Extension, SNAP-Ed Program

- Chrissa Carlson

Glossary of Terms

Case Management

A collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation, care coordination, evaluation, and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's and family's comprehensive health needs through communication and available resources to promote quality, cost-effective outcomes.

Community Eligibility Provision

The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. CEP allows the nation's highest poverty schools and districts to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications. Instead, schools that adopt CEP are reimbursed using a formula based on the percentage of students categorically eligible for free meals based on their participation in other specific means-tested programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Source: USDA Community Eligibility Provision Overview

Community Schools

In Maryland, a community school is any school that receives Concentration of Poverty Grants. The grants are formula-based and awarded to schools on an annual basis. The determining factor for eligibility is the 4-year average of the percentage of the school's students living in poverty (excluding the 2020-2021 school year), as determined by compensatory education enrollment. This is essentially the number of students receiving free and reduced-price meals.

Source: Maryland State Department of Education – Community Schools

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

A community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm. The growers and consumers provide mutual support and share the risks and benefits of food production.

Source: USDA National Agricultural Library – Community Supported Agriculture

Electronic Benefits Transfer Card (EBT)

Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) is an electronic system that allows a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participant to pay for food using SNAP benefits. When a participant shops at a SNAP-authorized retail store, their SNAP EBT account is debited to reimburse the store for food that was purchased. EBT is in use in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. EBT has been the sole method of SNAP issuance in all states since June 2004.

Source: USDA SNAP – Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)

Farmers Markets

A food market at which local farmers and food producers sell food and beverage products directly to consumers.

Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMs)

Free and Reduced-price Meals are available to eligible students through the National School Lunch Program.

Source: USDA National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

Glossary of Terms

Food Banks

A nonprofit organization (large in size) that distributes food to smaller food pantries as well as directly to people experiencing food insecurity.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

USDA Definition of Food Insecurity

Food Pantry

A nonprofit organization (typically small in size), such as faith-based organizations or community agencies, that receives donated food items and distributes them to food insecure people for preparation at home. A food pantry will often receive its supply of food from a food bank.

Food Security

For a household, food security means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods; and assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (that is, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

USDA Definition of Food Security

Linkages to Learning

Linkages to Learning is a prevention and intervention initiative established by the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS), MCPS, and local public and private nonprofit agencies. Linkages to Learning assists students and their families by providing or connecting them to services and resources that address the social, economic, health, and emotional issues that may interfere with student success. The organization assists whole school communities by bringing additional partners and resources into the school house to offer a range of supports and opportunities to students and families.

Linkages to Learning – Montgomery County Public Schools

Maryland Market Money (MMM)

Maryland Market Money (MMM) is a statewide food access program that feeds Marylanders and supports farmers. MMM removes economic barriers for Marylanders experiencing food insecurity, providing a dollar-for-dollar match for purchases made using federal nutrition benefits at participating Maryland farmers markets, farm stands, and CSAs.

Maryland Market Money Program

Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA)

Maryland Meals for Achievement (MMFA) provides state funds to allow participating schools to implement free breakfast in the classroom. This model increases students' access to and participation in breakfast.

Maryland Meals for Achievement – Maryland State Department of Education

Glossary of Terms

Maryland Summer SNAP for Children

Maryland Summer SNAP for Children provides a \$30 monthly cash benefit for food during the summer months and \$10 during winter break to reduce food insecurity and improve the diets of low-income children. The Maryland Department of Human Services' Family Investment Administration administers Summer SNAP. State law requires that local jurisdictions apply to participate in Summer SNAP and agree to contribute local funds.

Maryland DHS – Summer SNAP Information

Medicaid Direct Certification

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 amended section 1902(a)(7) of the Social Security Act (the Act) to permit Medicaid agencies to enter into data-sharing agreements with state agencies that administer the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. These data-sharing agreements allow the state agencies to directly certify students to receive both free and reduced price school meals based on the child's Medicaid eligibility and verified income. Direct certification has the potential to improve student access to school meals, reduce administrative burden for schools and families, and improve certification accuracy.

Medicaid Direct Certification Guidance (CMS PDF)

National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day.

USDA – National School Lunch Program Overview

Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT)

Pandemic-EBT, or P-EBT, is intended to help families in Maryland purchase food while schools are closed due to COVID-19. P-EBT provides SNAP-like benefits to children who would have received free or reduced-price meals if not for COVID-related school closures.

- Maryland DHS – Pandemic-EBT Information
- USDA – SNAP Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Guidance

Self-Sufficiency Standard

The amount needed to meet each basic need at a minimally adequate level, without public or private assistance. The assumptions and data components that go into the calculations are costs of housing, food, health care, child care, transportation, taxes and tax credits, emergency savings, and miscellaneous expenses. In Montgomery County, the Self-Sufficiency Standard for a family of four (2 adults, 1 preschool-aged child, 1 school-aged child) is \$91,252 (calculated by the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington).

Self-Sufficiency Standard – Official Website

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) is the nation's largest domestic food and nutrition assistance program, administered by the USDA for low-income Americans. SNAP provides nutrition assistance to eligible low-income individuals and households via a monthly benefit on an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. Similar to a debit card, it can be used at authorized retailer stores to purchase food. SNAP is the largest federal nutrition assistance program in the United States.

USDA – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

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Glossary of Terms

The Blueprint

The Blueprint for Maryland's Future was passed by the Maryland General Assembly in 2021 to transform public education in the state into a world-class education system. The Blueprint will increase education funding by \$3.8 billion each year over the next 10 years, enrich student experiences and accelerate student outcomes, as well as improve the quality of education for all children in Maryland, especially those who have been historically underserved.

Learn more about The Blueprint for Maryland's Future

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

A federal program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults who are enrolled for care at participating child care centers, day care facilities, and adult day care centers. CACFP also provides reimbursements for meals served to children and youth participating in afterschool care programs, children residing in emergency shelters, and adults over the age of 60 or living with a disability and enrolled in day care facilities.

Learn more about the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

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

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

Learn more about WIC (The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children)

Working Parents Assistance (WPA)

Montgomery County's Working Parents Assistance (WPA) Program is a County-sponsored program that is committed to helping eligible county residents pay for child care. While parents are at work or school, they can feel confident that their children are in a safe and caring environment.

Learn more about the Working Parents Assistance (WPA) Program

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End Notes

1. USDA Definitions of Food Security
2. Gundersen, C., M. Hake, A. Dewey, A. Engelhard (2021). *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021, Update March 2021* [Data file and FAQ]. Available from Feeding America: Contact Feeding America at research@feedingamerica.org.
3. Based on estimates in the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Table B17024. (2021).
4. The University of Washington Center for Women's Welfare Self-Sufficiency Standard "defines the income working families need to meet a minimum yet adequate level, taking into account family composition, ages of children, and geographic differences in costs. The Standard is an affordability and living wage economic security measure that provides an alternative to the official poverty measure." University of Washington Self-Sufficiency Standard – Washington
5. For a detailed discussion of the University of Washington's Self-Sufficiency Standard, and its application to Montgomery County, see "Children Living in Households below Poverty of Self-Sufficiency" section below.
6. For a detailed discussion see "Considering Race" section below. U.S. Census Data. 2015 ACS 5-Year Estimate Selected Population Detailed Table B17001.
7. For a more detailed discussion see "Considering Languages Spoken" below. U.S. Census Data. 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate Detailed Table B16009.
8. Food Research and Action Center. *Screen and Intervene: A Toolkit for Pediatricians to Address Food Insecurity*. January 2021. FRAC Pediatric Toolkit (PDF)
9. Food Research and Action Center. *Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs' Role in an Equitable Recovery*. September 2021. FRAC COVID-19 Research Report (PDF)
10. Drennen, Chloe et al. "Food Insecurity, Health, and Development in Children Under Age Four Years." *Pediatrics* 144, no. 4 (Oct. 2019).
11. Id.
12. See Food Research and Action Center. *Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs' Role in an Equitable Recovery*. September 2021. FRAC COVID-19 Research Report (PDF)
13. U.S. Census, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Table S0101 (2020).
14. Id.
15. Making this distinction explicitly clear was recommended by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT), an arm of the National Research Council (a body of the National Academies), in a requested review of the USDA's efforts to measure food insecurity. Available at USDA Definitions of Food Security.
16. Webb, Patrick, Jennifer Coates, Edward A. Frongillo, Beatrice Lorge Rogers, Anne Swindale, and Paula Bilinsky. "Measuring Household Food Insecurity: Why It's So Important and Yet So Difficult to Do." *The Journal of Nutrition* 136, no. 5 (May 1, 2006): 1404S–1408S. DOI: 10.1093/jn/136.5.1404S
17. Gundersen, C., M. Hake, A. Dewey, A. Engelhard (2021). *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021, Update March 2021* [Data file and FAQ]. Available from Feeding America: Contact Feeding America at research@feedingamerica.org.
18. Id.
19. *Map the Meal Gap 2020 Technical Appendix* at 3. Map the Meal Gap 2020 Technical Brief (PDF)
20. 87 FR 3315.
21. Based on estimates in the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Table B17024. (2021).
22. The University of Washington Center for Women's Welfare Self-Sufficiency Standard "defines the income working families need to meet a minimum yet adequate level, taking into account family composition, ages of children, and geographic differences in costs. The Standard is an affordability and living wage economic security measure that provides an alternative to the official poverty measure." Further information is available at: University of Washington Self-Sufficiency Standard – Washington
23. To see specific self-sufficiency levels please explore the Montgomery County Interactive Self-Sufficiency Tool at *Interactive Self-Sufficiency Standard*.
24. Too much being more than 185% of the FPL.

25. Too much being more than 130% of the FPL. Based on estimates in the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Table B17024. (2021). Note – Census does not report specifically on 130% of FPL so this is calculated as those below 125% plus 20% of those below 150%.
26. U.S. Census Data. 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate Detailed Table B17024.
27. Based on estimates in the U.S. Census, American Community Survey, Table B17024. (2021). Note – Census does not report specifically on 130% of poverty level so this is calculated as those below 125% plus 20% of those below 150%.
28. U.S. Census Data. 2015 ACS 5-Year Estimate Selected Population Detailed Table B17001.
29. U.S. Census Data. 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate Detailed Table B16009.
30. U.S. Census Data. 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimate Detailed Table B09010.
31. See generally. USDA Food & Nutrition Service. “National School Lunch Program.” 2022. USDA National School Lunch Program
32. Data provided by Montgomery County Public Schools. (November 2022).
33. Data from MCPS.
34. See USDA Food & Nutrition Service. “Child Nutrition Programs: Community Eligibility Provision.” 2019. USDA Community Eligibility Provision
35. “This model increases students’ access to and participation in breakfast. School administrators credit the MMFA with improving students’ test scores, behavior, attendance, and wellbeing. Parents praise the program for assisting children to prepare for their academic day.” MSDE. “Maryland Meals for Achievement.” Maryland Meals for Achievement Program
36. Data from MCPS; number of children receiving free breakfast is based on 2022 enrollment numbers at the 91 participating MCPS schools.
37. Maryland Hunger Solution. “Maryland Meals for Achievement.” Maryland Hunger Solution – MMFA
38. The 26 schools that have FARMs rate above 40%, but are not in MMFA are Albert Einstein, Bayard Rustin, Cleanspring, Col. Zadok A. Magruder, Damascus, Gaithersburg HS, Harriet R. Tubman, James Hubert Blake, Longview School, Lucy V. Barnsley, MacDonald Knolls, Montgomery Blair, Northwood, Paint Branch, Regional Inst. for Children & Adolescents (RICA), Ridgeview, Rock Terrace, Rockville, Rocky Hill, Rosemary Hills, Seneca Valley, Stephen Knolls School, Takoma Park, Thurgood Marshall, Up County Early Childhood Center, Wheaton. Estimate of new children getting breakfast is based on 2022 enrollment. Data from MCPS.
39. Montgomery County Food Security Task Force. *Final Report of Challenges and Solutions*. (July 2022).
40. “The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the largest federal nutrition assistance program.” Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) | Benefits.gov
41. Id.
42. Food Research Action Center (FRAC). “The Positive Effect of SNAP Benefits on Participants and Communities.” 2023. FRAC – Positive Effect of SNAP Benefits
43. See for example: the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Program (P-EBT) which, “provide[d] benefits to younger [than school-aged] children in households participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) whose covered child care facility is closed or operating with reduced hours or attendance, or

End Notes

44. “SNAP is a proven intervention to address food insecurity; however, not everyone who has income low enough to qualify for the program is eligible. For example, federal law currently prohibits many formerly incarcerated individuals—a number of whom are parents of young children—from accessing SNAP benefits, jeopardizing their health and making it more likely they will struggle to successfully re-enter society and avoid re-offending.” *Biden-Harris Administration National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health* at 9, citing The Sentencing Project, *A Lifetime of Punishment: The Impact of the Felony Drug Ban on Welfare Benefits* (September 2015).
45. Note: SNAP was formerly (and colloquially sometimes still is) referred to as “food stamps.”
46. *Baltimore Banner*, “SNAP Enrollment Drops Sharply in Maryland; Some Say Staffing Shortages, Policy Shifts Partially to Blame” (August 8, 2022). This article documents the many reasons eligible people are dropped from SNAP rolls and highlights the critical role enrollment coordinators play in keeping people in the program.
47. Q15 9A: “I don’t know how to apply (26.69%).” “I’m not sure if my child is eligible (26.10%).” “I feel embarrassed (24.14%).” “I’m not sure if I’m eligible (23.75%).”
48. USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “Joint Letter on Public Charge” (October 2019). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/joint-letter-public-charge>
49. Citation to survey needed.
50. Maryland Department of Human Services, “SNAP Outreach Community Based Organizations” (2023). Available at: <https://dhs.maryland.gov/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program/snap-outreach-program/snap-outreach-community-based-organizations>
51. Id.
52. This estimate is based on an annual salary of \$80,000 for one training and outreach expert; five enrollment experts with annual salaries of \$60,000 each; and \$50,000 per year for administration, technology, materials, and other costs. This assumes that the training and outreach expert supervises the five enrollment experts.
53. Under the USDA’s National School Meals Program, discussed at length in the “Expanding Free School Meals” section of this plan.
54. Under the USDA’s Child and Adult Care Feeding Program, discussed at length in the “Expanding Free Daycare Meals” section of this plan.
55. Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), “The Positive Effect of SNAP Benefits on Participants and Communities” (2023). Available at: <https://frac.org/programs/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/positive-effect-snap-benefits-participants-communities>
56. This conclusion is based on anecdotal data from community-based organizations (CBOs), which report operating at full capacity without advertising or conducting outreach, and on feedback from residents indicating that many do not know where or how to seek help enrolling in benefits. Additionally, many likely front-line referral sources interviewed are not currently making SNAP enrollment referrals but would do so if properly trained.

From March to June 2022, 7,676 children in Montgomery County were dropped from SNAP enrollment. Although the precise reason for this decline is unknown, it coincides with the post-COVID reintroduction of redeterminations.
57. Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), “Initiatives to Make SNAP Benefits More Adequate Significantly Improve Food Security.” This report analyzes why SNAP benefits are inadequate, reviews research demonstrating the positive effects of more adequate benefits, and offers key policy solutions. Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/snap-initiatives-to-make-snap-benefits-more-adequate.pdf>

58. Food Research & Action Center (FRAC), “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Initiatives to Make SNAP Benefits More Adequate Significantly Improve Food Security, Nutrition, and Health” (February 2019). Available at: <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/snap-initiatives-to-make-snap-benefits-more-adequate.pdf>
59. Maryland SB 218 / HB 338 (2019).
60. Data provided by Montgomery County Health and Human Services. Special thanks to Social Services Officer & Deputy Chief Oscar Mensah, Ph.D., for assistance compiling these numbers.
61. USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) Questions and Answers for Retailers” (November 2020). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/pandemic-ebt-questions-and-answers-retailers>
62. Maryland Department of Human Services, “Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) Program” (October 2021). Available at: <https://dhs.maryland.gov/p-ebt/>
63. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “New Food Insecurity Data Highlighted Need for Permanent Summer EBT Program” (September 2022). Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/new-food-insecurity-data-highlight-need-for-permanent-summer-ebt-program>
64. See, for example, The Hamilton Project finding that “Pandemic EBT reduced food hardship experienced by low-income families with children and lifted at least 2.7–3.9 million children out of hunger.” Full report: *The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship*.
65. H.R. 8450 — 117th Congress (2021–2022), *Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act*. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/8450>
66. Maryland Department of Human Services, “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Eligibility Rules” (2022). Available at: <https://dhs.maryland.gov/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program/eligibility-rules/>

“There are exceptions for refugees, asylees, immigrants whose deportation has been withheld, Cuban/Haitian entrants, Amerasians and some immigrants legally admitted for permanent residence, parolees, aliens granted conditional entry, and certain battered spouses and children. Border Crossing Native Americans, certain Iraqi and Afghan immigrants, victims of human trafficking, and Hmong or Laotian tribe members may also be eligible. Even if some members of your household are not eligible, those who are may be able to get food supplement benefits.”
67. Primary Care Coalition, “Care for Kids” (2019). Available at: <https://www.primarycarecoalition.org/care-for-kids.html>
68. Jennifer M. Haley, Genevieve M. Kenney, Hamutal Bernstein, and Dulce Gonzalez, *Many Immigrant Families with Children Continued to Avoid Public Benefits in 2020, Despite Facing Hardships*, Urban Institute (2021).

“One in 5 adults in immigrant families with children (20.0 percent) and almost 3 in 10 of those in low-income immigrant families with children (28.8 percent) reported that they or a family member avoided one or more noncash public benefits or other help with basic needs in 2020 because of concerns about green card status or other immigration-related reasons. ... Adults in immigrant families with children reported that their families most often avoided SNAP (7.7 percent), followed by Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (6.3 percent).”

Available at: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/many-immigrant-families-children-continued-avoid-public-benefits-2020-despite-facing-hardships>

See also USDA and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Joint Letter on Public Charge” (2022). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/joint-letter-public-charge>

69. Primary Care Coalition, “Care for Kids” (2019). Available at: <https://www.primarycarecoalition.org/care-for-kids.html>

70. Note on the average SNAP benefit: Estimates vary depending on methodology. Two reasonable measures are:

- USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Maryland average: \$111 per person per month.
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) 2023 estimate for a household of four: \$718 per month (or \$179.50 per person).

An average of these estimates is approximately \$145 per person per month.

According to USDA FNS, in 2018 the average household SNAP benefit in Maryland was \$211, with an average household size of 1.9 people, resulting in approximately \$111 per person per month. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/SNAP-household-state-averages/2018#>

The CBPP estimates that in 2023 the average SNAP benefit for a household of four will be \$718 per month (approximately \$179.50 per person). Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/a-quick-guide-to-snap-eligibility-and-benefits>

71. Note: This number does not include administrative or other costs.

72. The Care for Kids program is administered by the Primary Care Coalition. More information is available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Program.aspx?id=PHS/PHSMedCareforUninsChildrenP1703.html>

73. USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “National School Lunch Program” (2022). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>

74. See generally USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “National School Lunch Program” (2022). Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>

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End Notes

75. Data provided by Montgomery County Public Schools (November 2022).
76. See *Maryland Cares for Kids Act* (Chapter 560) of 2018.
77. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. “FNS Responds to COVID-19 (2022).”
78. Cohen JFW, Polacsek M, Hecht CE, Hecht K, Read M, Olarte DA, Patel AI, Schwartz MB, Turner L, Zuercher M, Gosliner W, Ritchie LD. *Implementation of Universal School Meals during COVID-19 and beyond: Challenges and Benefits for School Meals Programs in Maine*. Nutrients. 2022 Sep 28;14(19):4031. doi:10.3390/nu14194031. PMID: 36235683; PMCID: PMC9571988.
79. U.S. Census Data, American Community Survey, Table B17024 (2022). Note: the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS) varies by family composition. A detailed discussion of the 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) reasoning and the population of children at different FPL multiples is provided in the previous *Childhood Food Insecurity in Montgomery County* section. To see specific self-sufficiency levels, explore the Montgomery County Interactive Self-Sufficiency Tool at *Interactive Self-Sufficiency Standard*.
80. Note: there is a significant discrepancy between the census estimate of FARMs-eligible children (school-aged children in households with incomes below 185% of FPL), which is 34,755, and the number of children actually enrolled in FARMs in MCPS, which is 70,348. At the time of publication this discrepancy has not been accounted for.

Subject matter experts offered several theories to explain why so many more children are FARMs enrolled than are theoretically eligible. Among those theories was that direct certification of children receiving SNAP or Medicaid benefits might account for some of the difference, as those programs have different eligibility requirements. It was also suggested that FARMs enrollment forms are rarely audited, and therefore it is possible that MCPS is enrolling some number of children from households that do not qualify. Finally, some believe this gap reflects flawed census estimates, particularly when compared to MCPS FARMs enrollment data. At this time, the authors are not confident in speculating on the source of this discrepancy beyond the proposed theories above.
81. White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. “White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health (2022).”
“Elevating school meals is a key strategy to improve our nation’s health and would benefit all children—importantly, it would significantly strengthen the school meals program for those children who rely upon it the most. The Biden-Harris Administration will take a major first step by working with Congress to expand access to healthy, free school meals for 9 million more children by 2032.”
82. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. “Community Eligibility Provision (2019).”
83. Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Office of School & Community Nutrition Programs. “Maryland Meals for Achievement (2022).”
“This model increases students’ access to and participation in breakfast. School administrators credit the MMFA with improving students’ test scores, behavior, attendance, and wellbeing. Parents praise the program for assisting children to prepare for their academic day.”
84. Data from MCPS. Number of children receiving free breakfast is based on 2022 enrollment numbers at the 91 participating MCPS schools.
85. Colorado Proposition FF, passed November 8, 2022. See “Colorado Proposition FF – Ballotpedia (2022).”
Maine, *Act Regarding Expanding Access to Free School Meals*, LD1678-SP540 (2021). See “Maine Legislature Bill LD 1678-SP540.”
86. To see specific self-sufficiency levels, explore the Montgomery County Interactive Self-Sufficiency Tool at *Interactive Self-Sufficiency Standard*.
87. U.S. Census Data, American Community Survey, Table B17024.

88. **Special Note on Enrollment Percentage Estimation:** This is based on the Census estimate of all school-aged children living in Montgomery County in 2022 (Table S0101, Age and Sex, 2021: ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables) compared to MCPS 2022 enrollment data.

89. U.S. Census Data, American Community Survey, Table B17024.

90. **Special Note on Validity of Estimates:** This estimate is calculated by subtracting the 71,547 children already receiving free meals through FARMs enrollment and/or attendance at a universal meals school from the estimated 73,848 school-aged children living in households below 400% of FPL who are estimated to be enrolled in MCPS.

This is a rough and imprecise estimate based on several simplifying assumptions. Two critical assumptions limit its value for budgeting purposes. First, it uses 400% of FPL as a universal measurement of self-sufficiency, although self-sufficiency is more accurately measured by considering family composition. Second, it assumes that all 71,547 children currently receiving free meals are below 400% of FPL, which is almost certainly not true for all children in universal schools.

The authors present this estimate because they believe it is sufficiently accurate to convey the approximate scale of providing free meals to all children below self-sufficiency. Specifically, such a program would likely serve a few thousand additional students, but not many thousands or tens of thousands.

91. Data from 2022, courtesy of MCPS.

92. See **Special Note on Validity of Estimates** above, as it impacts the validity of this calculation.

93. Data from 2022, courtesy of MCPS. Free meals number includes those enrolled in FARMs, as well as those attending a universal meals school.

94. Based on \$4 per meal per day, with 182 school days in the year.

95. Data from interviews with MCPS Food and Nutrition staff.

96. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. “Child and Adult Care Food Program (2022).”

97. Note that the CACFP program for larger child care centers is administered by the Maryland State Department of Education.

98. Maryland State Department of Education, Office of School and Community Nutrition Programs. “Training and Technical Assistance.”

Note that some providers may be eligible for reimbursement for all children based on a community assessment and/or their local school meeting the requirements of the USDA Community Eligibility Provision.

99. 87 FR 143 at 44329. Note that providers currently receive additional funding through temporary reimbursements as part of the *Keep Kids Fed Act of 2022*. Id. at 44328.

100. Id.

101. Id.

102. Numbers based on interviews with MCPS.

103. Id.

104. Based on subject matter expert interviews with administrators and providers. For information on the standardized menu requirements, see Maryland State Department of Education, Office of School and Community Nutrition Programs, “Training and Technical Assistance.”

See also USDA Food and Nutrition Service, “CACFP Training Tools on Meals and Snacks.”

105. Montgomery Connects. “Computer for You (2021).”

106. \$8,377 is based on six children all receiving breakfast, lunch, and a snack five days a week for 52 weeks at the rate of \$5.37 per day per child.

107. Assumes 62 newly enrolled home daycares will be eligible for the “free” reimbursement level and the remaining 188 will be eligible for the “reduced” reimbursement level. These estimates assume the proportion of “free” to “reduced” eligible remains at the current split of 25% and 75%.

“Free”-eligible family child care home providers could receive as much as \$8,377 (see note above), and “reduced”-eligible providers could receive as much as \$4,025 (based on six children receiving breakfast, lunch, and a snack five days a week for 52 weeks at the rate of \$2.58 per day per child).

In total, these providers could receive as much as \$1,276,074 (\$519,374 for the 62 “free” level providers and \$756,700 for the 188 “reduced” level providers). See 87 FR 142 at 44329.

108. “The County is home to three Early Head Start programs. A companion program to Head Start, Early Head Start (EHS) is also a federally funded comprehensive health, education, parent engagement, and social services program for low-income families with children birth to three years of age and pregnant women. Family Services, Inc., CentroNia, and the Reginald S. Lourie Center serve as the County’s EHS grantees.” *2019–2022 Community Needs Assessment* at 28.
109. Note: the challenges for EHS three-year-olds are well documented in the *2019–2022 Community Needs Assessment* at 28.
110. PLEASE NOTE: The EHS, HS, and Pre-K gap in Montgomery County is a well-documented issue in prior Community Needs Assessments.

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End Notes

In 2018: 2 of the 45 FSI EHS three-year-old children who aged out of the program transitioned to Head Start. Only 18 children total transitioned to another early childhood environment.

0–60% of three-year-olds at FSI and 30% of three-year-olds at CentroNia do not continue in early care and education after aging out of EHS. Children fall back in language and socio-emotional development.

A positive screen requires a response of ‘often true’ or ‘sometimes true’ to either or both of the following statements:

‘Within the past 12 months we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.’

‘Within the past 12 months the food we bought just did not last and we did not have money to get more.’

End Notes

154. Webb, Patrick, Jennifer Coates, Edward A. Frongillo, Beatrice Lorge Rogers, Anne Swindale, and Paula Bilinsky. “Measuring Household Food Insecurity: Why It’s So Important and Yet So Difficult to Do.” *The Journal of Nutrition* 136, no. 5 (May 1, 2006): 1404S–1408S.
155. FoodStat Dashboard – Montgomery County Food Council; Feeding America Map the Meal Gap Tool.
156. See “Address Benefit Inadequacy, Especially During the Summer” section of this plan.
157. See “Provide Direct Benefits to SNAP Ineligible Households” section of this plan.
158. See “Expansion of SNAP Enrollment Programs” section of this plan.
159. See “Expansion of Free School Meals” section of this plan.
160. Maryland Office of School and Community Programs, *Maryland Meals for Achievement*, available at Maryland Meals for Achievement – Program Information.
161. Based on subject matter expert interviews with administrators and providers. For information on the “standardized menu” requirements see Maryland State Department of Education, Office of School and Community Nutrition Programs, Training and Technical Assistance, available at MSDE Training and Technical Assistance – School and Community Nutrition. See also USDA Food and Nutrition Service, CACFP Training Tools on Meals and Snacks, available at USDA CACFP Meals and Snacks Training Tools.
162. See Maryland Market Money Program Information for more on the MMM program.
163. Katherine Joyce, American Academy of Pediatrics News, “Food security screening: addressing EHR, coding challenges” (April 2018), available at Food Security Screening: Addressing EHR, Coding Challenges (PDF).
164. A detailed discussion of this shortcoming is presented in the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, *Final Report of Challenges and Solutions* (July 2022).
165. Child and Dependent Care Credit FAQs – Internal Revenue Service.
166. Food Research and Action Center. *Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs’ Role in an Equitable Recovery* (September 2021), available at FRAC COVID-19 Research Report 2021 (PDF).
167. Id.

Further Reading

- Montgomery County Food Security Plan (PDF)
- Maryland State Department of Education Blueprint for Maryland’s Future
- White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health (PDF)

Appendices

- A. Resident Survey Data Summary
- B. Resident Engagement Overview and Highlights

APPENDIX A Resident Survey Data Summary

Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC



Figure 2: Montgomery County Food Council logo depicting a stylized orange tree on the left, green agricultural fields sweeping across the foreground, and a blue city skyline silhouette on the right, symbolizing the connection between local agriculture and the community.

Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results

Montgomery County Food Council

October 2022

SharpInsight

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- Characteristics of Survey Respondents (Page 3)
- Household Food Security (Page 5)
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- Food Assistance Program Use (Page 10)
- Topline Summary (Page 15)

Survey Background

The Montgomery County Food Council developed and disseminated the Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey, seeking input from county residents to guide the development of strategies to address hunger among children and youth.

The 15-question survey was created by Community Science, a county-based evaluation firm, and implemented via SurveyMonkey.com from August 25, 2022 through September 15, 2022. The survey used a convenience sample and was available in English and Spanish. It was shared through the Food Council's channels (e.g., distribution lists, social media) and partners to share with others (e.g., food assistance providers) and also distributed via the county Department of Health and Human Services and other county government communication channels. Respondents were randomly selected to receive gift cards if they provided their email addresses.

The survey focused on parents, grandparents, and/or legal guardians of children in Montgomery County, Maryland. If a respondent did not fall within one of these categories, they were excluded from this analysis. The survey started first with questions regarding obtaining food for the household, whether the household was food secure, and reasons that have kept households from getting food over the last year. This was followed by multiple questions about food assistance from distribution avenues, such as food pantries and meal sites, and benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Demographic questions regarding household size, languages spoken, race/ethnicity, and household income were the final survey questions.

In the fall of 2022, the Montgomery County Food Council engaged a county-based evaluation firm, Sharp Insight, LLC, to analyze the data and develop a summary report of findings from the Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey. With guidance from the Food Council, Sharp Insight cleaned the data, ran both descriptive and inferential analyses, and developed this summary report. This report provides the survey results, starting with demographics of the respondents and indicators of household food security. The report then delves into household food access and food assistance, with a particular focus on examining differences between food secure and insecure households.

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Overall, 1,315 respondents completed the 2022 Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey. Of these, 84% took the survey in English and 16% in Spanish. Household size of the respondents averaged 4.5 people (children and adults), with an average of 1.8 children (n=1,170).

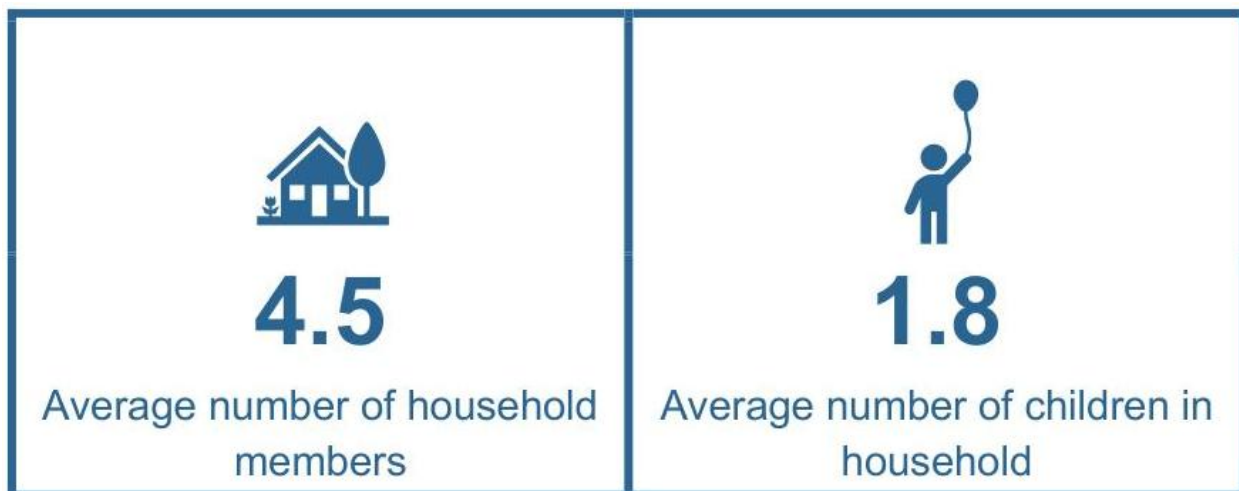


Figure 3: Infographic displaying an average household size of 4.5 people and an average of 1.8 children per household among survey respondents (n=1,170).

The survey included a diverse group of respondents. Respondents were asked to choose their race or ethnicity and could only choose one option. Almost half of the survey respondents (46%) identified as White, 21% as Hispanic or Latino, 14% as Black or African American, and 7% as American Indian or Alaska Native. Five percent identified as Asian, 3% as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 2% as African, and 1% as having two or more races.

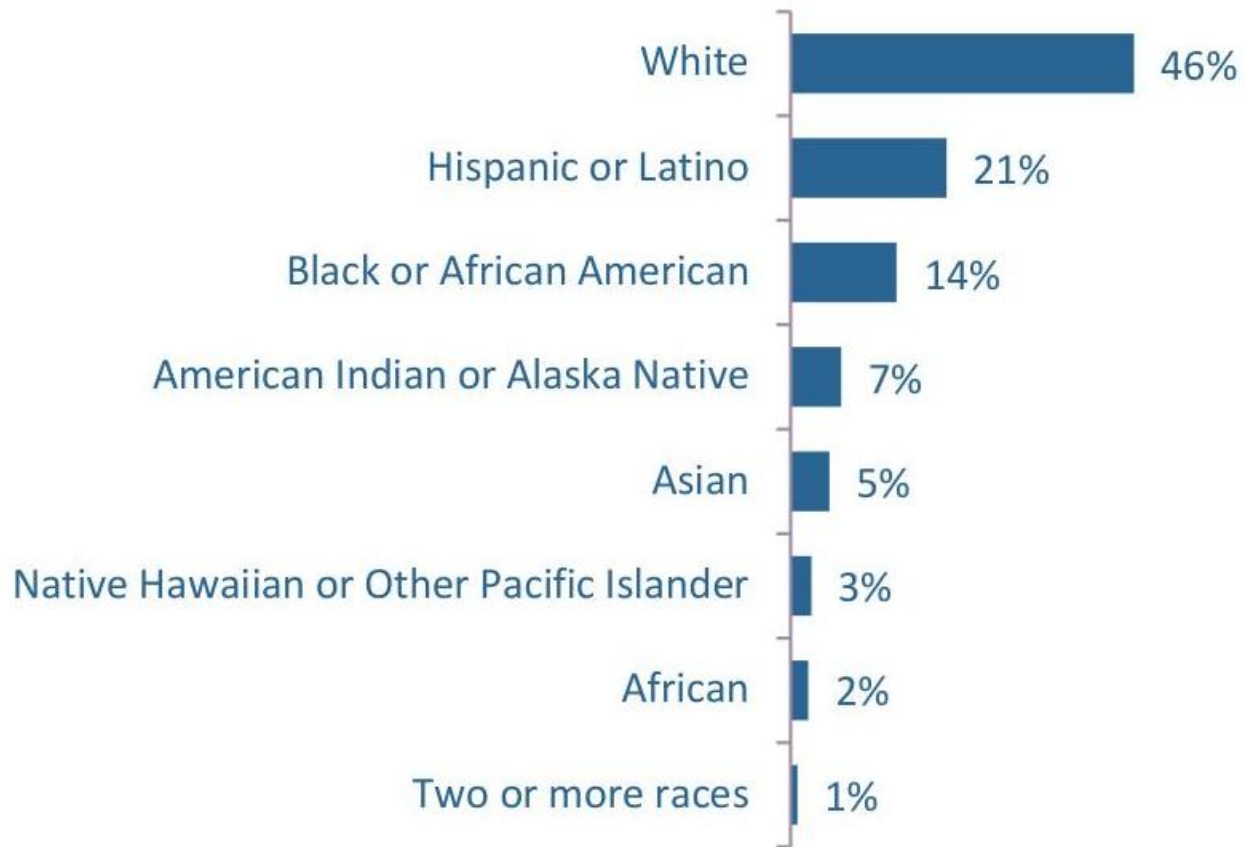


Figure 4: Horizontal bar chart illustrating the race and ethnicity of survey respondents (n=1,232), with the largest group identifying as White (46%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (21%) and Black or African American (14%).

Two-thirds of respondents reported an annual household income between \$20,000–\$59,999. Approximately a quarter of the respondents (23%) had annual incomes above \$60,000. About a third each had annual household incomes between \$20,000 and \$39,999 (35%) and \$40,000 and \$59,999 (31%). About one in ten (12%) had annual incomes below \$20,000.

Total Annual Household Income (n=1,198)

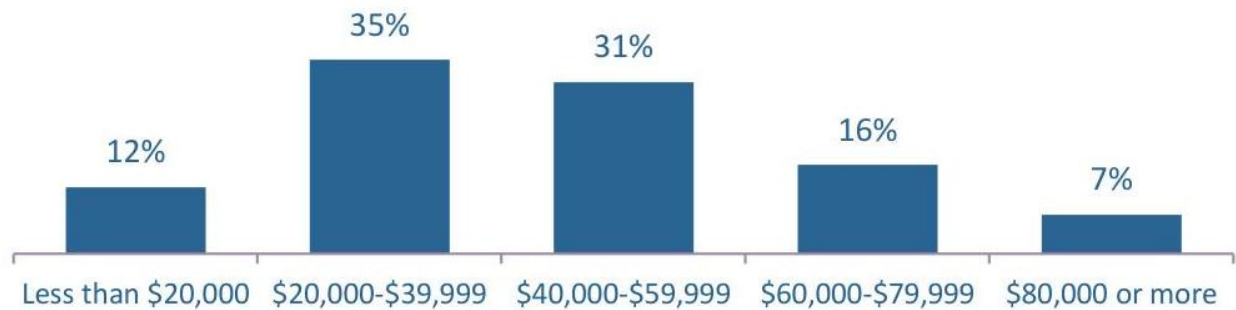


Figure 5: Distribution of Total Annual Household Income Among Respondents (n=1,198). The bar chart displays five income categories. The largest share is \$20,000–\$39,999 at 35%, followed by \$40,000–\$59,999 at 31%. Sixteen percent report \$60,000–\$79,999, 7% report \$80,000 or more, and 12% report less than \$20,000.

The majority of respondents reported that English was the primary language spoken in their childhood home. More specifically, English was spoken in most (76%) of the respondents' childhood homes, followed by Spanish or Spanish Creole (16%) and other languages (6%). Of the other languages, most were Asian languages, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog.

Primary Language Spoken in Respondents' Childhood Home (n=1,249)

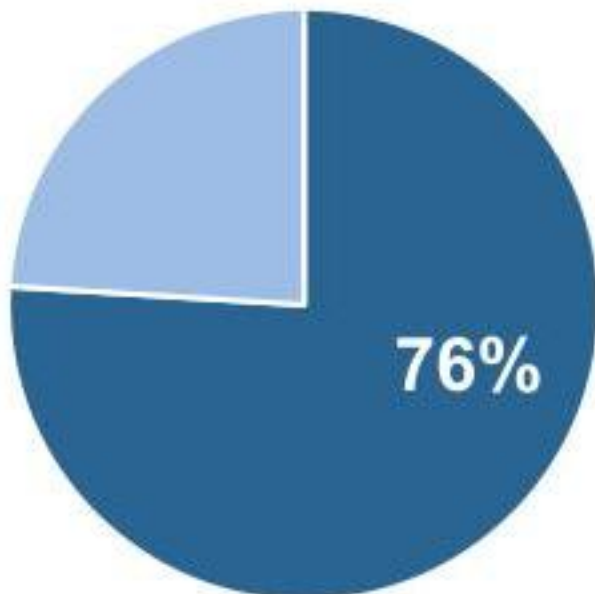


Figure 6: English as Primary Childhood Language (76%). The pie chart highlights that over three-quarters of respondents indicated English was the main language spoken in their childhood home.

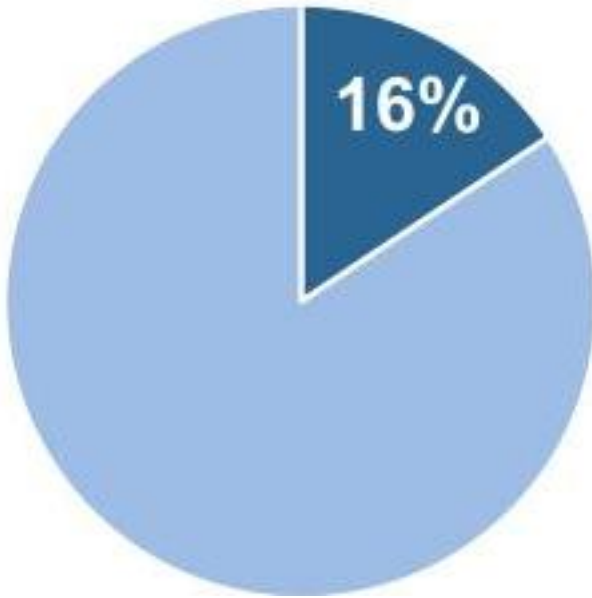


Figure 7: Spanish or Spanish Creole as Primary Childhood Language (16%). The chart shows a smaller segment representing respondents who primarily spoke Spanish or Spanish Creole in their childhood home.

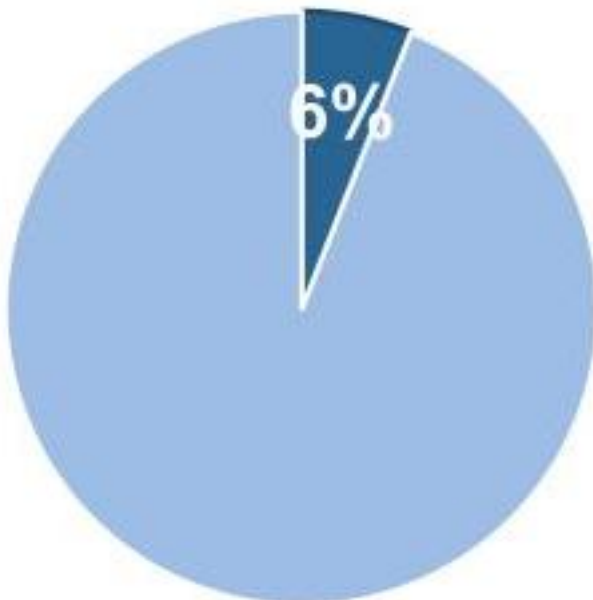


Figure 8: Other Languages as Primary Childhood Language (6%). The chart shows a small segment representing respondents who spoke other languages—most commonly Asian languages such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog—in their childhood home.

Household Food Security

Survey respondents were asked questions to gauge household level of food security. One question asked whether, “In the last year, how often did you worry that your household would run out of food before you could get more?” Response choices included never, sometimes, often, or all of the time. Those responding “never” were deemed food secure. Those responding “sometimes” were defined as moderately food insecure, while those who marked “often” or “all of the time” were defined as highly food insecure.

Overall, 27% of the respondents reported high food insecurity levels, 62% reported moderate levels, and 11% reported being food secure.

Those taking the Spanish survey were significantly more likely than those taking the English survey to report high levels of insecurity over the last year. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between those taking the English and Spanish surveys and their food security levels. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2(2, N = 1,315) = 28.8, p < .001$ (reads as “chi-square equals 28.8 with 2 degrees of freedom and a sample size of 1,315, p less than .001”).

Other indicators reviewed for differences in food security levels were household size and number of children; however, no statistical differences were found.

Reported household income statistically aligned with reports of food security. Households with incomes below \$20,000 were more likely to report high food insecurity, those with household incomes between \$20,000 and \$59,999 were more likely to report moderate food insecurity, and those making 60,000 or more annually were more likely to report being food secure ($X^2(8, N = 1,198) = 328.9, p < .001$, reads as “chi-square equals 328.9 with 8 degrees of freedom and a sample size of 1,198, p less than .001”).

Levels of Household Food Security

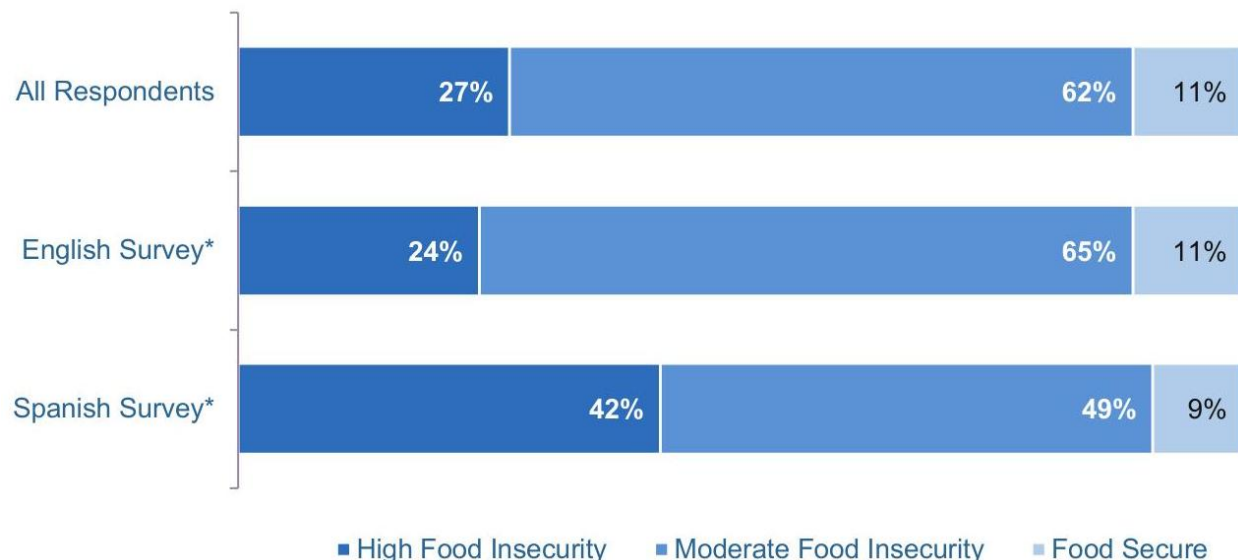


Figure 9: Distribution of household food security levels among all respondents and by survey language. For all respondents, 27% reported high food insecurity, 62% moderate food insecurity, and 11% food secure. Among English survey respondents, 24% reported high food insecurity, 65% moderate food insecurity, and 11% food secure. Among Spanish survey respondents, 42% reported high food insecurity, 49% moderate food insecurity, and 9% food secure.

The figure presents three stacked horizontal bars comparing levels of food security. Among all respondents, just over one-quarter reported high food insecurity, nearly two-thirds reported moderate food insecurity, and about one in ten were food secure. English survey respondents reported lower levels of high food insecurity and higher levels of moderate food insecurity compared to Spanish survey respondents. Spanish survey

respondents reported the highest proportion of high food insecurity and the lowest proportion of food secure households. *** Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Household Food Access

Survey participants were asked a number of questions about how they access food for their household. When looking at food access avenues, the results show statistically significant differences between those households that are food secure (reporting never worrying the household would run out of food before they could get more) and food insecure.

Food secure households are more likely to usually get food from grocery stores (69%) than food insecure households (50%), whereas food insecure households are more likely to use food banks, pantries, or community food distribution sites (43%) than food secure households (19%). About a third of both household types utilize farmers markets or on-farm markets at generally the same rates—for food secure (32%) and food insecure households (37%). Food insecure households are more likely to obtain food from family, friends, or neighbors (33%) and MCPS meal sites (29%) than food secure households (15% and 19%, respectively), whereas food secure households are more likely to use restaurants or food trucks (45% compared to 23%).

How do you usually get your food for the household? (Select all that apply)

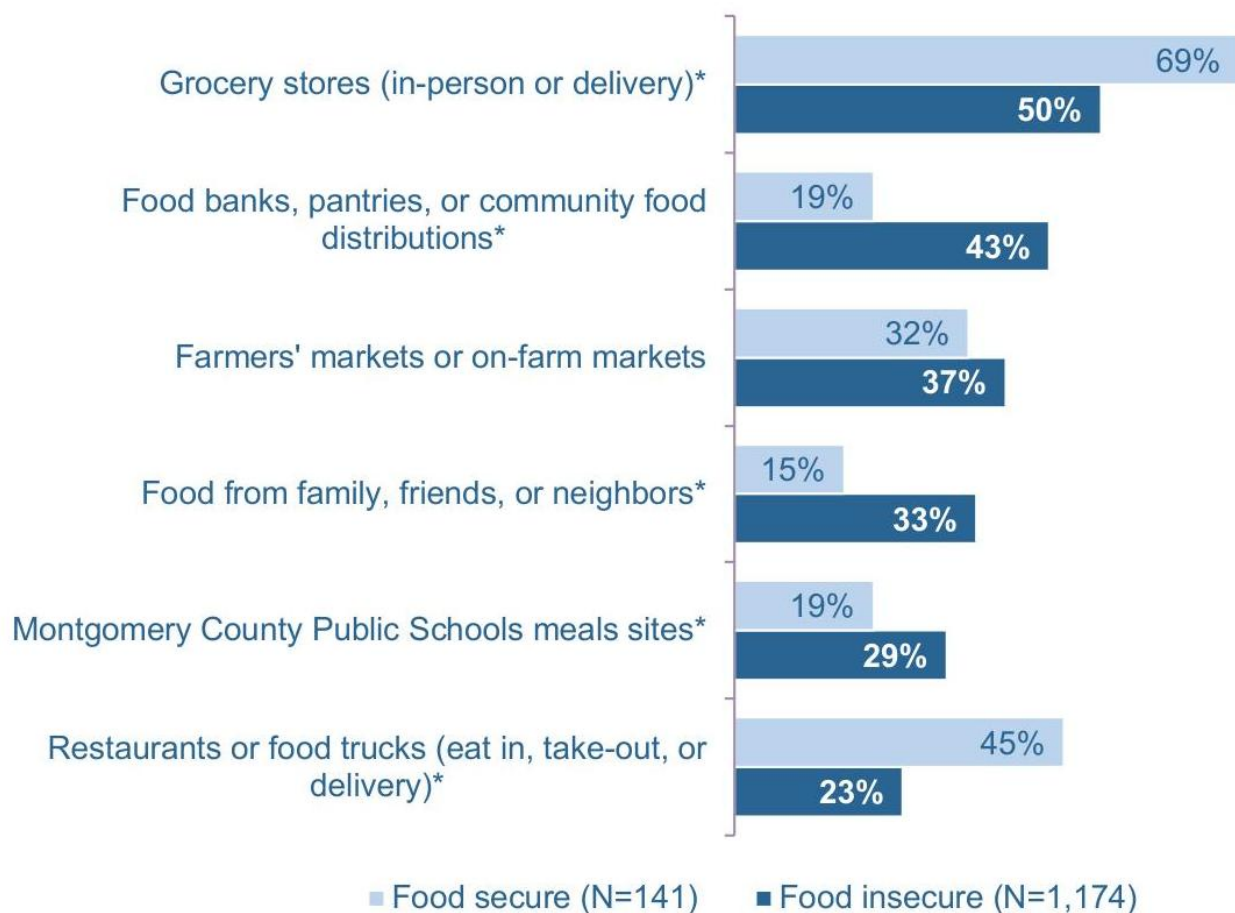


Figure 10: Comparison of food access sources for food secure and food insecure households. The horizontal bar chart shows six categories. Grocery stores (in-person or delivery): 69% food secure, 50% food insecure. Food banks, pantries, or community food distributions: 19% food secure, 43% food insecure. Farmers' markets or on-farm markets: 32% food secure, 37% food insecure. Food from family, friends, or neighbors: 15% food secure, 33% food insecure. Montgomery County Public Schools meal sites: 19% food secure, 29% food insecure. Restaurants or food trucks (eat in, take-out, or delivery): 45% food secure, 23% food insecure. Differences marked with an asterisk indicate statistical significance at $P < .01$.

Statistically significant difference at $P < .01$

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With respect to food security and transportation, food secure households were significantly more likely to drive to obtain food (70%). In contrast, food insecure households relied on multiple modes of transportation at similar rates:

- Walking (24%)
- Driving (20%)
- Biking (20%)
- Public transportation (19%)

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between food security and transportation to food access sites. The result was statistically significant: chi-square (χ^2) with 6 degrees of freedom and $N = 1,315$ was 161.2, $p < .001$ (reads as “chi-square with six degrees of freedom equals one hundred sixty-one point two, p less than point zero zero one”).

How do you usually get to the store, market, meal site, or other locations where you most often get food?

For all barriers to obtaining food asked in the survey, there were statistically significant differences between households who reported being food secure and those who reported being food insecure. Participants were asked what had kept them from getting food for their household over the last year and were given a list of possible reasons.

Food secure respondents were much more likely to report that nothing kept them from getting food during the last year (70%) compared to food insecure respondents (30%).

Among respondents from food insecure households, the top barriers to obtaining food were:

- Not having enough money (48%)
- Not being able to find the food they want or need (25%)
- Not being sure where to go to get food assistance (24%)
- Being embarrassed to ask for support (22%)
- Having difficulty getting food for the household’s children (20%)

During the past year, what has kept you from getting food for your household?
(Select all that apply.)

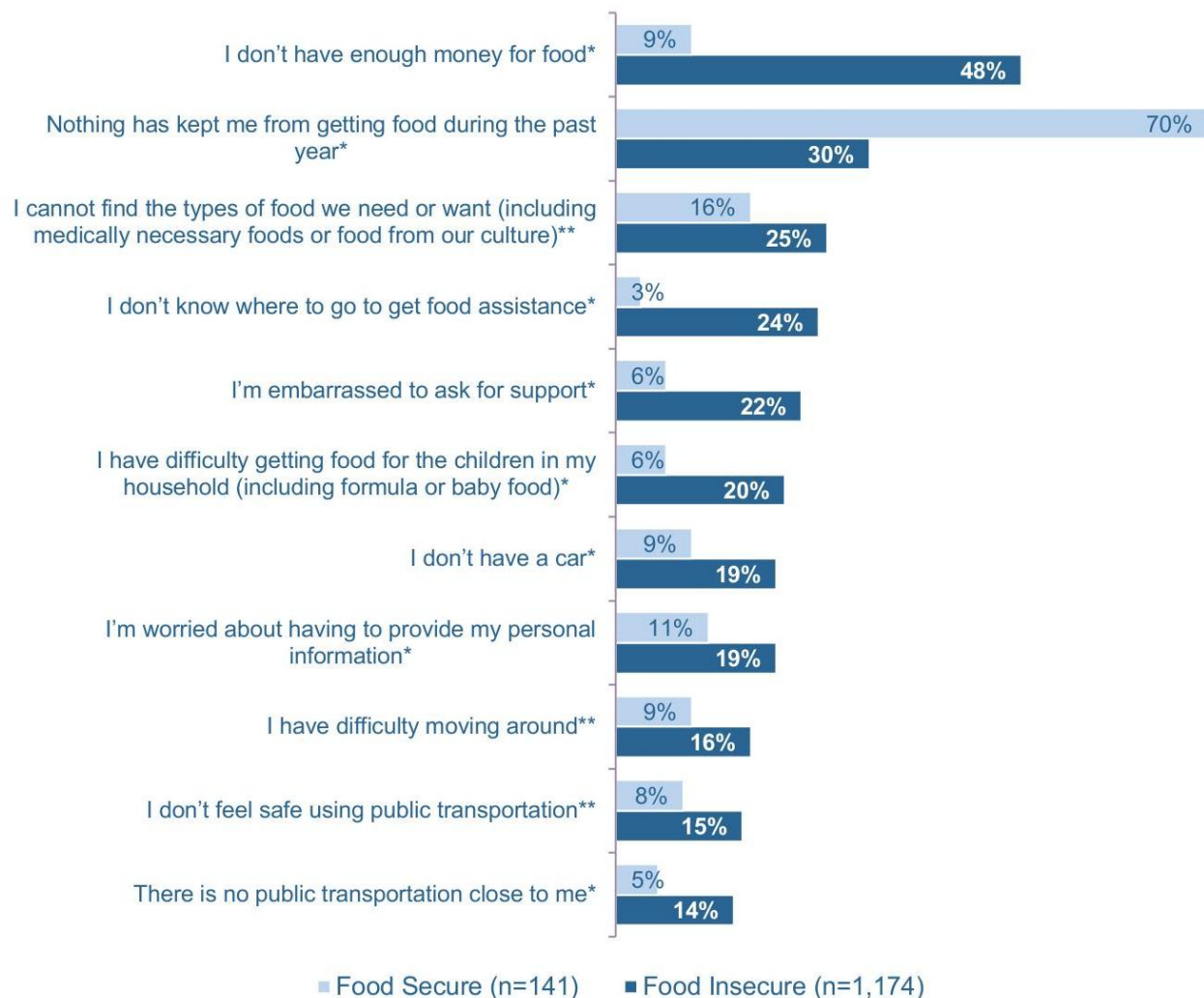


Figure 11: Horizontal bar chart showing reasons households reported being kept from getting food during the past year, comparing food secure (n = 141) and food insecure (n = 1,174) respondents. Food insecure households reported higher rates across most barriers. The most frequently selected barrier among food insecure households was “I don’t have enough money for food” (48%) compared with 9% of food secure households¹. Other common barriers among food insecure households included not knowing where to go for food assistance (24% vs. 3%²), embarrassment asking for support (22% vs. 6%³), difficulty getting food for children (20% vs. 6%⁴), not having a car (19% vs. 9%⁵), concern about providing personal information (19% vs. 11%⁶), difficulty moving around (16% vs. 9%⁷), not feeling safe using public transportation (15% vs. 8%⁸), and lack of nearby public transportation (14% vs. 5%⁹). In contrast, 70% of

¹ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

² Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

³ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

⁴ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

⁵ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

⁶ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

⁷ Statistically significant differences at $p < .05$.

⁸ Statistically significant differences at $p < .05$.

⁹ Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.

food secure households reported that nothing had kept them from getting food, compared with 30% of food insecure households¹⁰.

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¹⁰*Statistically significant differences at $p < .01$.*

Near the end of the survey, respondents were asked to choose two aspects that would make it easier to get food for their household from a list. For food insecure households, the top three food resources desired included increased food benefit amounts (36%), food assistance programs that are more accessible (35%), and gift cards to buy groceries (29%). Top resources for food secure households include raw ingredients to cook at home selected themselves from food pantries (32%), gift cards to buy groceries (30%), increased food benefits (27%), and more accessible food assistance programs (27%).

Top Two Resources to Make It Easier to Get Food for Your Household

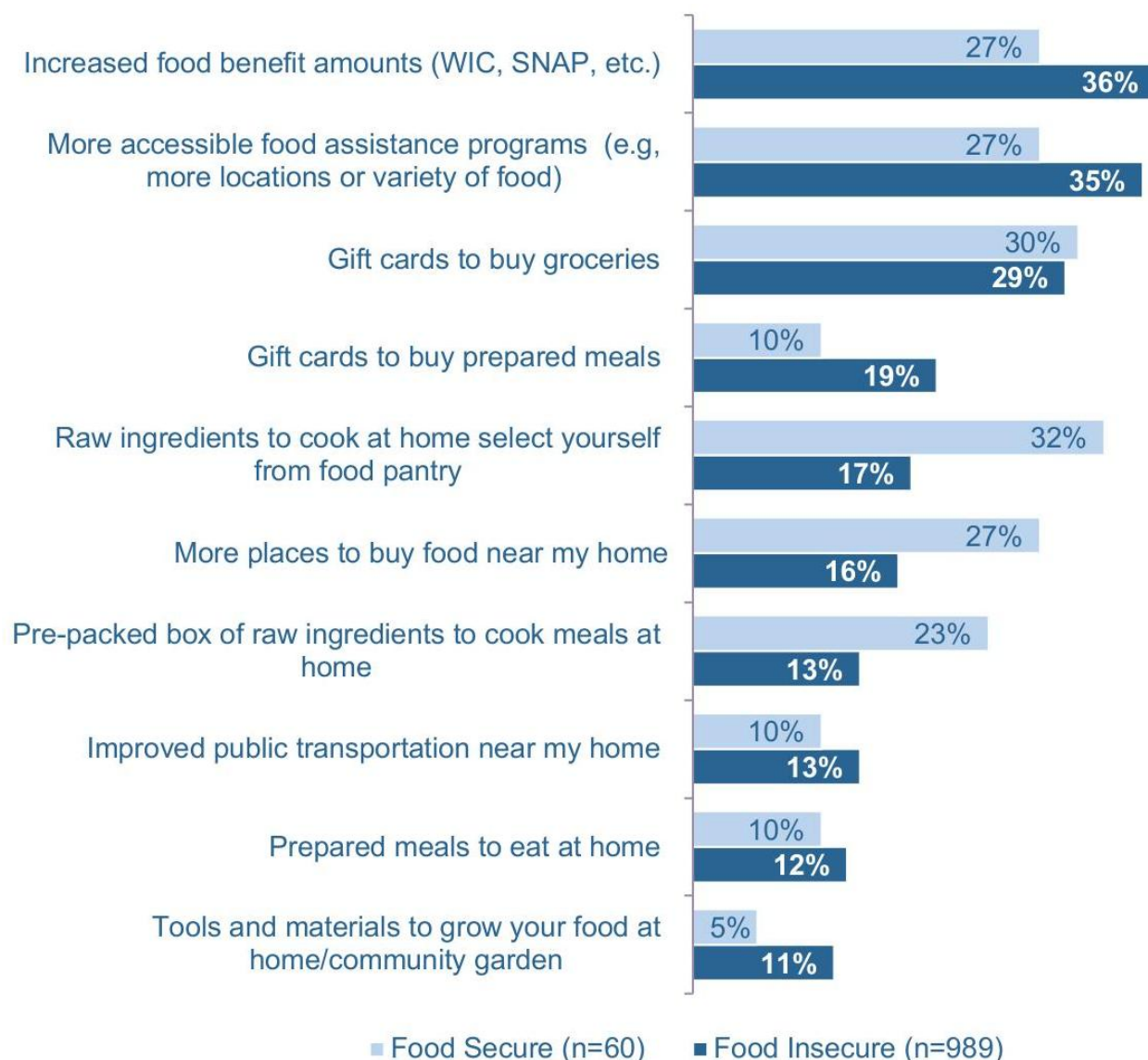


Figure 1: Horizontal bar chart showing the percentage of respondents selecting each resource, comparing Food Secure (n=60) and Food Insecure (n=989) households. Food Insecure households most frequently selected increased food benefit amounts (36%), more accessible food assistance programs (35%), and gift cards to buy groceries (29%). Food Secure households most frequently selected raw ingredients to cook at home from food pantries (32%), gift cards to buy groceries (30%), increased food benefit amounts (27%), and more accessible programs (27%). Additional options shown include more places to buy food near home (27% secure, 16% insecure), pre-packed boxes of raw ingredients (23% secure, 13% insecure), improved public transportation (10% secure, 13% insecure), prepared meals to eat at home (10% secure,

12% insecure), gift cards for prepared meals (10% secure, 19% insecure), and tools/materials to grow food (5% secure, 11% insecure).

Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Food Assistance Program Use

Survey respondents were asked a number of questions about food assistance via food distribution avenues, such as food banks, food pantries, and other community food distribution or meal programs, and food benefit programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Free and Reduced Meals at Schools (FARMS).

Among the respondents ($n = 1,315$), 63% used both food assistance programs (e.g., food distribution and food benefit) while 17% used neither of these programs. Another one in five received assistance solely through food distribution avenues (8%) or food benefit programs (13%). When analyzed by language of survey completion (Spanish and English), there were no statistically significant differences found.

Table 1: Types of Food Assistance Used ($n = 1,315$)

Assistance Type	Percentage	Description
Both Distribution and Benefit Programs	63%	Received both food assistance via food distribution avenues and food benefit programs
Food Distribution Only	8%	Received food assistance via food distribution avenues but not through food benefit programs
Food Benefit Only	13%	Received food assistance via food benefit programs but not through food distribution avenues
Neither Program	17%	Did not receive assistance through food distribution avenues or food benefit programs

Assistance via Food Distribution Avenues

To examine one part of food assistance, survey participants were asked whether their household currently receives assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community food distribution or meal programs.

Seventy percent of respondents reported receiving food distribution assistance (e.g., food banks, pantries, and/or other community distribution or meal programs) ($n = 1,315$).

Food insecure households were statistically more likely to report receiving food distribution assistance (74%) than food secure households (36%). This difference was measured through a chi-square test of independence to examine whether receiving this assistance is related to whether the household is food secure, and it was significant: chi-square ($1, N = 1,315$) = 89.7, $p < .001$ (reads as “chi-square with 1 degree of freedom and N equals 1,315 equals 89.7, p less than point zero zero one”).

Food Distribution Assistance by Food Secure and Food Insecure Households ($n = 1,315$)

Food Secure Households ($n = 141$)

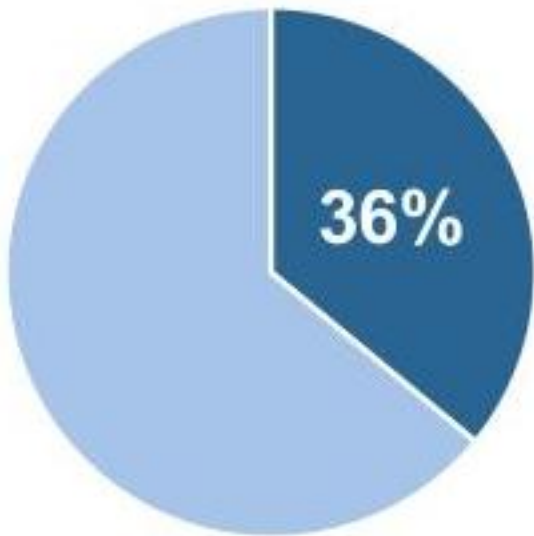


Figure 1: Food Secure Households ($n = 141$). The pie chart indicates that 36% of food secure households reported receiving assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community food distribution or meal programs, while 64% did not receive assistance.

Food Insecure Households ($n = 1,174$)

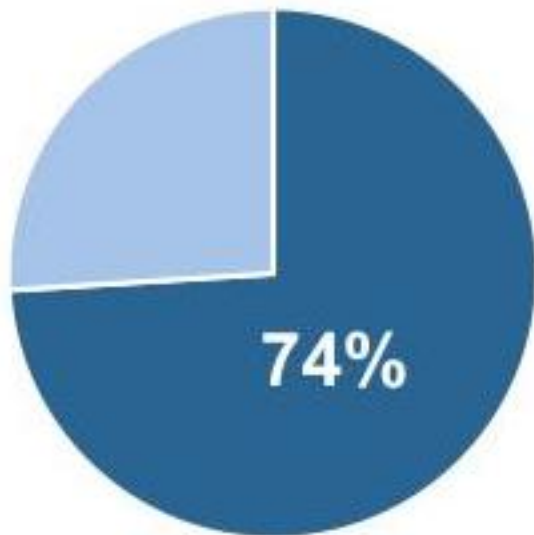


Figure 2: Food Insecure Households ($n = 1,174$). The pie chart shows that 74% of food insecure households reported receiving assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community food distribution or meal programs, while 26% did not receive assistance.

Participants not receiving assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community food distribution or meal programs ($n = 391$) were questioned about what kept them from asking for help from the programs and were provided with a list of choices. The highest number (41%) of respondents who did not receive food assistance reported that they did not know how to ask for help. About one in five reported they did not need it (21%) or that they felt embarrassed (18%). Fifteen percent (15%) reported there was too much

paperwork, and 15% said they did not want to provide their personal information.

Reasons That Kept Respondents from Asking for Help (Select all that apply, $n = 391$)

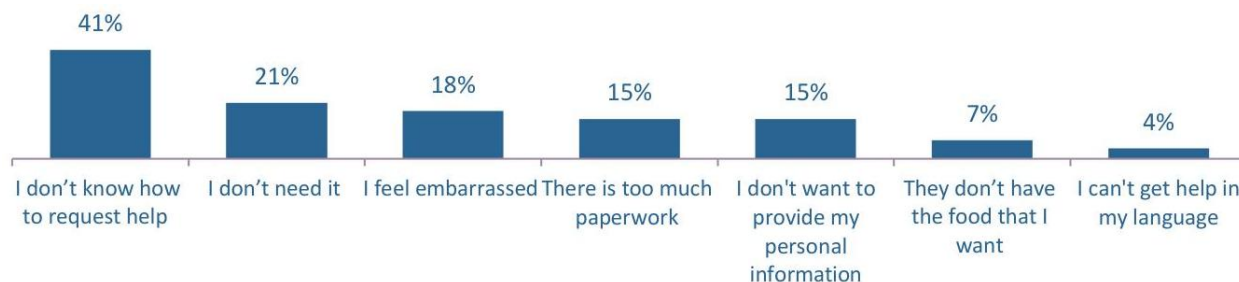


Figure 3: Reasons for Not Seeking Food Assistance ($n = 391$). The bar chart shows that 41% did not know how to request help; 21% reported they did not need assistance; 18% felt embarrassed; 15% cited too much paperwork; 15% did not want to provide personal information; 7% said programs did not have the food they wanted; and 4% reported they could not get help in their language.

All of the survey participants were asked, “If your household needs assistance getting food in the future, how likely are you to seek help at these sites in your community?” Respondent choices were “very likely,” “likely,” “unlikely,” or “very unlikely.” Overall, food insecure households had higher percentages of respondents marking “very likely” or “likely” across all selections than did food secure households. Participants overall were most likely to seek help from a food bank or pantry. Food insecure households were next most likely to reach out to a church or faith-based organization (73%), a community organization or neighborhood group (71%), and/or schools (70%). Respondents from food insecure households were significantly more likely to seek future help, if needed, from church or faith-based organizations, healthcare providers, or childcare providers. *** Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Percent Likely or Very Likely to Seek Help from These Sites When Needed in the Future

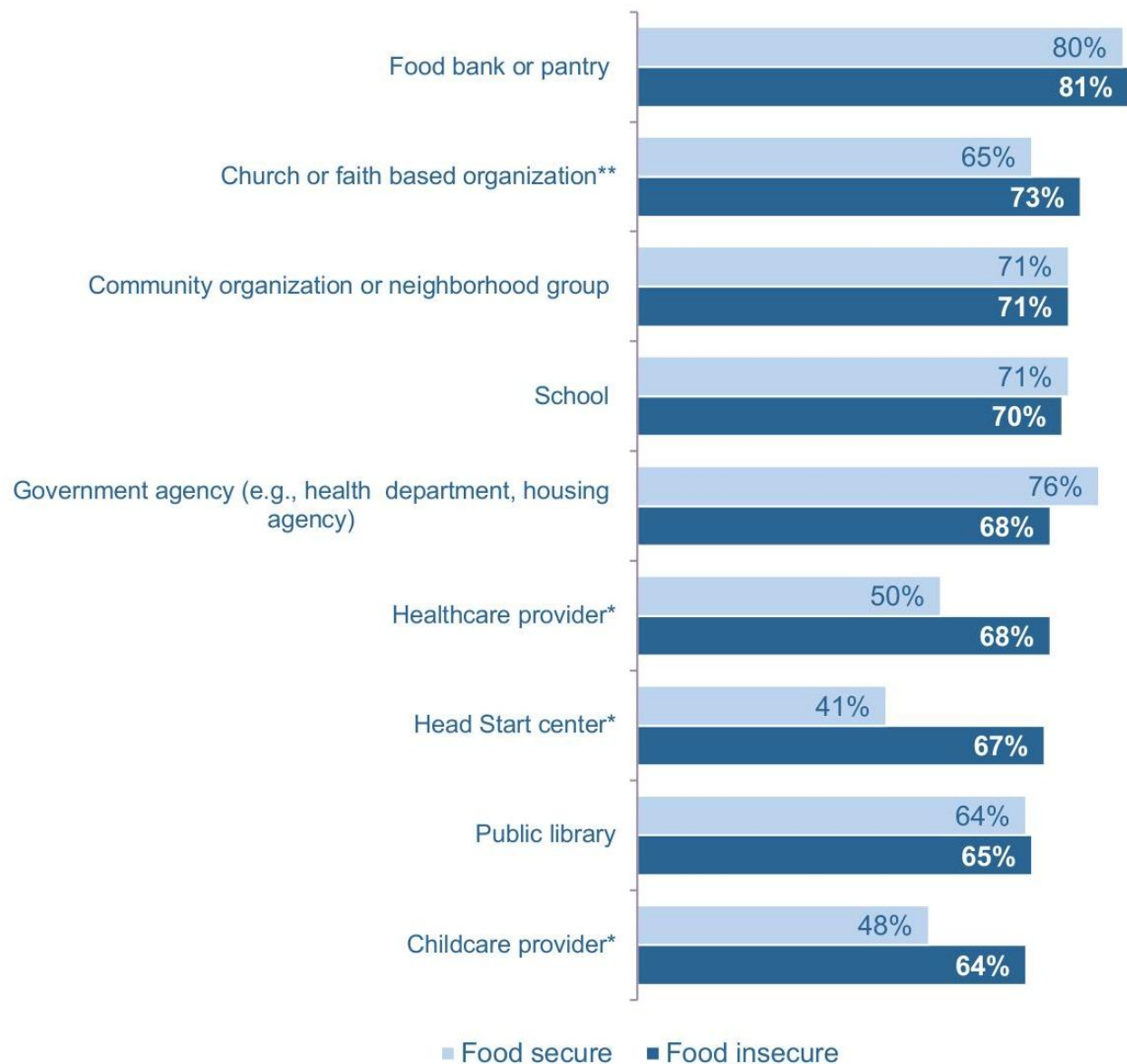


Figure 5: Percent of Respondents Likely or Very Likely to Seek Help from Selected Sites in the Future, by Food Security Status

The chart compares the percentage of respondents who report they are likely or very likely to seek help from selected sites in the future, shown separately for food secure and food insecure households.

Table 5: Percent Likely or Very Likely to Seek Help from Selected Sites

Site	Food Secure (%)	Food Insecure (%)
Food bank or pantry	80	81
Church or faith-based organization**	65	73
Community organization or neighborhood group	71	71

Site	Food Secure (%)	Food Insecure (%)
School	71	70
Government agency (e.g., health department, housing agency)	76	68
Healthcare provider*	50	68
Head Start center*	41	67
Public library	64	65
Childcare provider*	48	64

Note: Overall number of respondents varies from 1,233 to 1,302.

* Indicates statistically significant differences at $p < 0.01$ (reads as “p less than 0.01”).

** Indicates statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$ (reads as “p less than 0.05”). *** Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Assistance via Food Benefit Programs

Survey participants were asked whether their household was currently enrolled in food benefit programs such as SNAP, WIC, and FARMS. Overall, 75% reported receiving this assistance. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine whether receiving this assistance was related to household food security. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2(1, N = 1,315) = 99.6, p < .001$ (reads as “chi-square of 1 degree of freedom with N equals 1,315 equals 99.6, p less than point zero zero one”). That is, food insecure households were much more likely to report receiving this assistance (80%) than food secure households (41%).

Seventy-five percent of respondent households reported being enrolled in food benefit programs such as SNAP, WIC, and FARMS ($n = 1,315$).

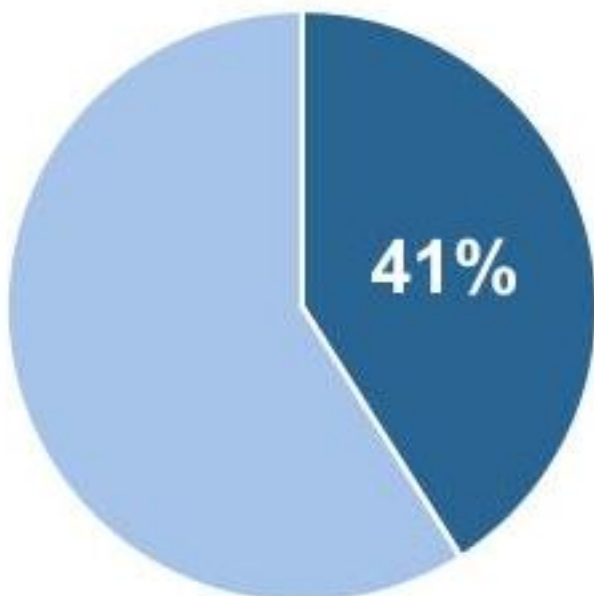


Figure 6: Respondents with food secure households ($n = 141$). The pie chart shows 41% enrolled in food benefit programs and 59% not enrolled.

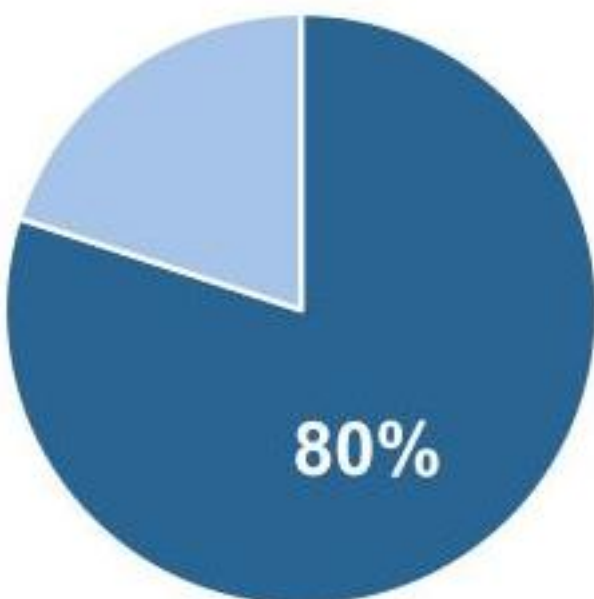


Figure 7: Respondents with food insecure households ($n = 1,174$). The pie chart shows 80% enrolled in food benefit programs and 20% not enrolled.

enrolled in food benefit programs and 20% not enrolled.

For those participants not receiving food benefit assistance ($n = 324$), the primary reason reported for not asking for help (32%) was that they did not know how to apply. Other reasons included reporting that they do not need it (22%), not knowing whether their children are eligible (18%), and not knowing whether their household is eligible (16%).

- 32% did not know how to apply
- 22% reported they do not need it
- 18% did not know whether their children are eligible
- 16% did not know whether their household is eligible

*** Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Reasons that kept respondents from participating in food benefit programs (Select all that apply) (n=324)

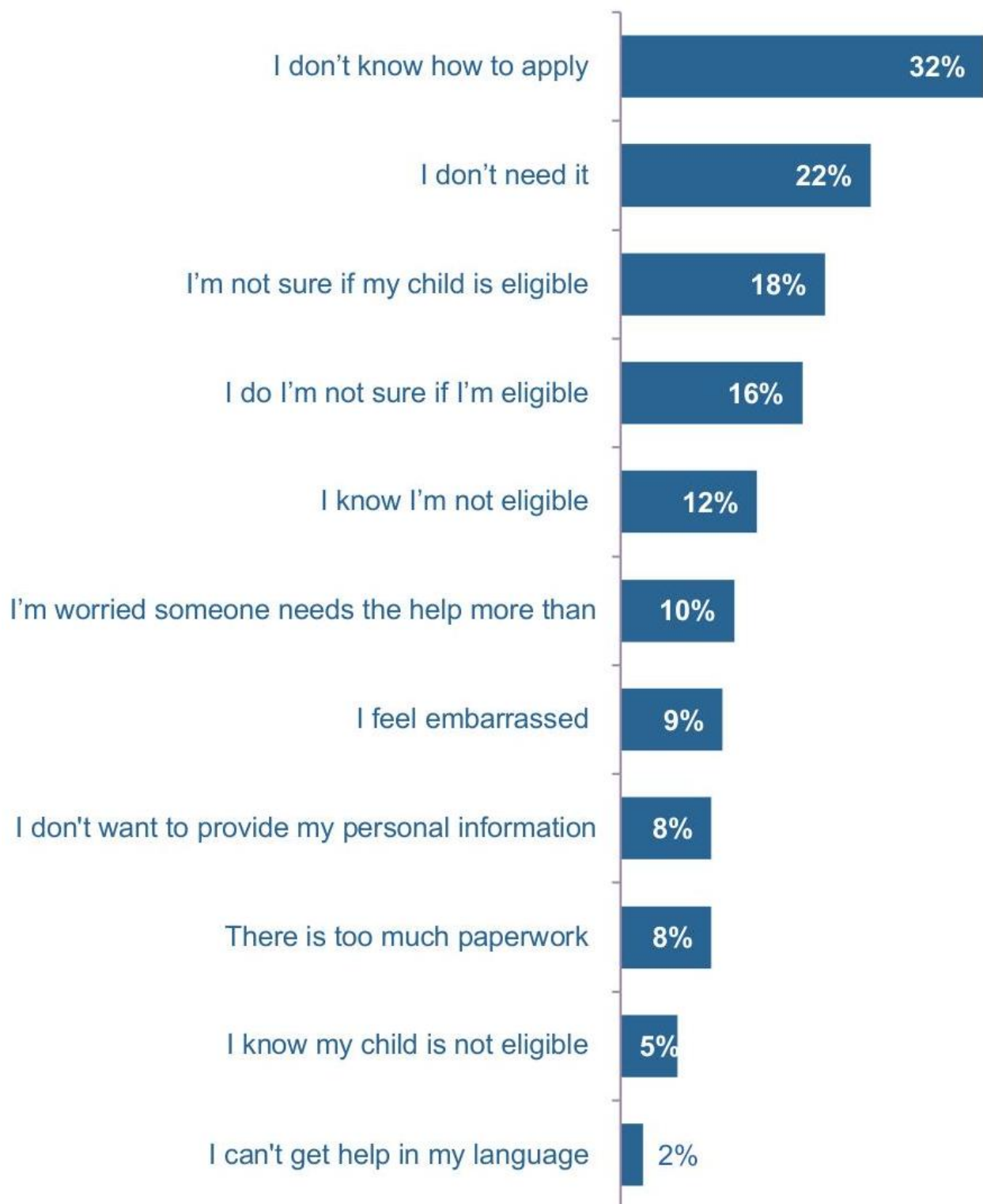


Figure 8: Reasons respondents did not participate in food benefit programs (n = 324). The most common reason was not knowing how to apply (32%), followed by not needing the benefit

(22%) and uncertainty about a child's eligibility (18%). Lower-frequency reasons included paperwork concerns (8%), privacy concerns (8%), embarrassment (9%), and language barriers (2%).

Reason	Percentage
I don't know how to apply	32%
I don't need it	22%
I'm not sure if my child is eligible	18%
I'm not sure if I'm eligible	16%
I know I'm not eligible	12%
I'm worried someone needs the help more than me	10%
I feel embarrassed	9%
I don't want to provide my personal information	8%
There is too much paperwork	8%
I know my child is not eligible	5%
I can't get help in my language	2%

Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

Topline Summary

In the summer of 2022, the Montgomery County Food Council developed and disseminated a survey, *Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey*, seeking input from county residents to guide the development of strategies to address hunger among children and youth. The data were analyzed and reported by a county-based evaluation firm, Sharp Insight, LLC. A topline summary of findings by topic is outlined below.

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

- Overall, 1,315 respondents completed the 2022 *Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey*. Of these, 84% took the survey in English and 16% in Spanish.
- The survey included a diverse group, with 46% of respondents identifying as White, 21% as Hispanic or Latino, 14% as Black or African American, 7% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 5% as Asian, 3% as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 2% as African, and 1% as having two or more races.
- Two-thirds of survey participants reported annual household incomes between \$20,000–\$59,999.

Household Food Security

- Overall, 27% of the respondents reported high food insecurity levels, 62% reported moderate levels, and 11% reported being food secure.
- Those taking the Spanish survey were significantly more likely than those taking the English survey to report high levels of insecurity over the last year.
- Reported household income statistically aligned with reports of food security. For instance, households with incomes below \$20,000 were more likely to report high food insecurity.

Household Food Access

- Food secure households are more likely to usually get food from grocery stores (69%) than food insecure households (50%), whereas food insecure households are more likely to use food banks, pantries, or community food distribution sites (43%) than food secure households (19%).
- Food secure households were significantly more likely to drive to obtain food (70%), whereas food insecure households rely equally on walking (24%), driving (20%), biking (20%), and public transportation (19%).
- There were statistically significant differences for all barriers to obtaining food asked in the survey between households who reported being food secure and food insecure.
- For food insecure households, the top three food resources desired included increased food benefit amounts (36%), food assistance programs that are more accessible (35%), and gift cards to buy groceries (29%). *** Montgomery County Childhood Hunger 2022 Survey Results | Prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC

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Food Assistance Program Use

- About two-thirds of the respondents (63%) used **both** food assistance programs (e.g., food distribution and food benefit), while 17% used neither of these programs.

Food Distribution Assistance

- The majority of respondents (70%) reported receiving food distribution assistance from food banks, pantries, and/or other community distribution or meal programs.
- Food insecure households were statistically more likely to report receiving this food distribution assistance (74%) than food secure households (36%).
- The highest number (41%) of respondents that did not receive food assistance reported that they did not know how to ask for help.
- In regard to seeking assistance in the future, participants (80–81%) were most likely to seek help from a food bank or pantry. Food insecure households were next most likely to reach out to a church or faith-based organization (73%), a community organization or neighborhood group (71%), and/or schools (70%).

Assistance from Food Benefit Programs

- Three-quarters (75%) of respondent households reported being enrolled in food benefit programs such as SNAP, WIC, and FARMS.
- For those participants not receiving **food benefit assistance**, the primary reason reported for not asking for help (32%) was that they did not know how to apply.

Discussion Questions

As the Montgomery County Food Council and partners review findings from the 2022 Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey, Sharp Insight, LLC respectfully offers the following questions for discussion:

- What findings, if any:
 - **Confirmed** what you already knew or understood to be true in the county?
 - Raised additional questions or areas for potential **future exploration**?
 - Will be most useful in **advocating** for the work of the Montgomery County Food Council?
 - How might the Montgomery County Food Council engage its partners in **strategically using** these findings?

APPENDIX B RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND HIGHLIGHTS

Prepared by Community Science

Montgomery County's Strategic Plan to Address Childhood Hunger Resident Engagement Overview and Highlights



Figure 9: Residents seated together in conversation, appearing to participate in a facilitated discussion about childhood hunger strategies.

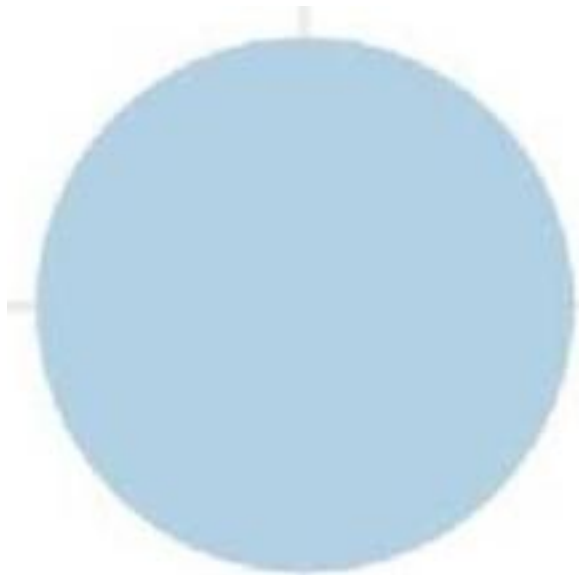


Figure 10: Blue circular design element forming part of a larger infographic layout.



Figure 11: Community member seated outdoors in a wheelchair, suggesting inclusive participation in resident engagement activities.

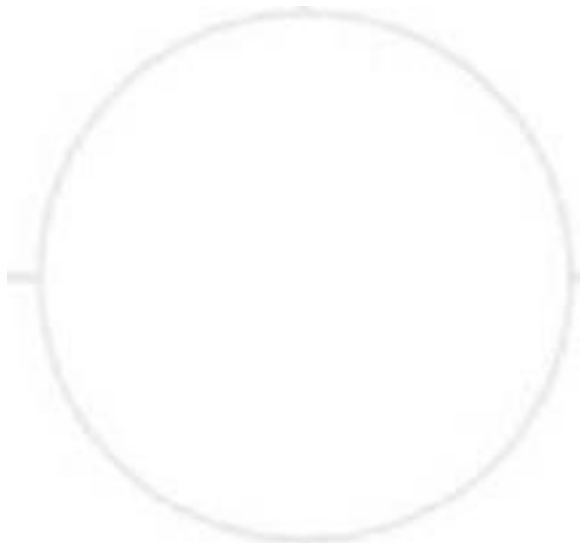


Figure 12: Gray circular design element used as a placeholder within the overall visual framework.

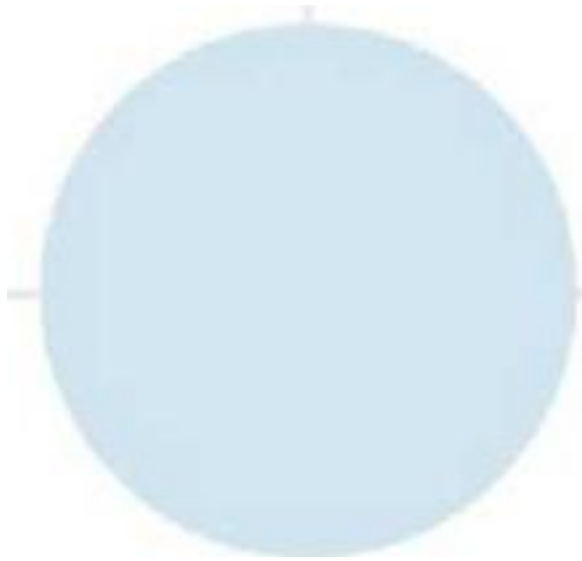


Figure 13: Blue circular graphic component consistent with the page's infographic theme.



Figure 14: Adult and child posed together, symbolizing family perspectives included in the engagement process.



Figure 15: Circular graphic labeled “STRENGTH,” highlighting a key theme or value identified through resident engagement.



Figure 16: Two children leaning close together, representing youth voices or peer relationships within the community.

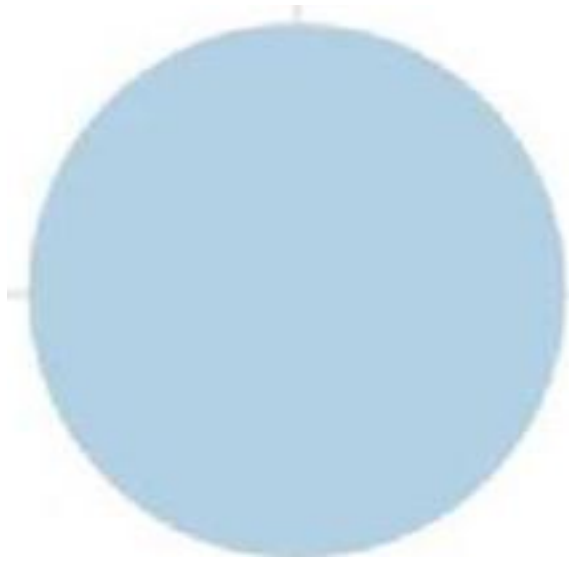


Figure 17: Blue circular graphic element reinforcing the visual consistency of the engagement highlights page.



Figure 18: Gray circular design element used as a visual spacer within the infographic layout.



Figure 19: Small group of children with an adult in an outdoor setting, illustrating community and family engagement.



Figure 20: Blue circular graphic element forming part of the visual engagement summary.



Figure 21: Three people leaning toward one another in conversation, suggesting collaborative dialogue during engagement sessions.



Figure 22: Circular portrait of a community member, emphasizing individual resident perspectives in the strategic planning process.

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Community Science 438 N. Frederick Ave, Suite 315 Gaithersburg, MD 20877 Phone: 301-519-0722 Fax: 301-519-0724 Community Science website

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- Introduction
- Barriers to Food Access
- Utilization and Experience with Food Assistance Resources
- Strategies to Address Food Access Barriers

Introduction

The Montgomery County Food Council worked with various community partners to implement resident engagement efforts. The goal of this partnership was to gain a better understanding of the food access challenges that children and youth are currently facing. Responses to the Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey¹, which was administered in English and Spanish and received more than 1300 responses, together with the information gathered at 3 listening sessions² attended by a total of 30 residents, provided quantitative and qualitative data that helped inform the creation of this plan. Key takeaways from these engagement efforts include focusing on barriers to food access, utilization and experience with food assistance resources, and strategies to address food access barriers are summarized below.

Community Science

The following notes provide additional detail:

1. The Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey was created by the Montgomery County Food Council and Community Science. Analysis of survey results was performed by Sharp Insight.
 2. Resident listening sessions were hosted by Identity, Inc., Manna Food Center, and The UpCounty Hub. The listening session toolkit and protocols were created by Community Science.
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¹The Montgomery County Childhood Hunger Survey was created by the Montgomery County Food Council and Community Science. Analysis of survey results was performed by Sharp Insight.

²Resident listening sessions were hosted by Identity, Inc., Manna Food Center, and The UpCounty Hub. The listening session toolkit and protocols were created by Community Science.

Barriers to Food Access

Food affordability and the overall high cost of living are the most significant factors affecting access to adequate food among families with children; healthcare needs, childcare costs, and household size are related considerations. Participants in community engagement activities reported that the cost of food compared to their incomes was the main barrier they faced in acquiring food for their households.

- Survey participants with incomes below \$20,000 were more likely to report high food insecurity, those with household incomes between \$20,000 and \$59,999 were more likely to report moderate food insecurity, and those making \$60,000 or more annually were more likely to report being food secure. Almost half of the survey respondents (48%) with food insecure households reported that not having enough money was the main factor that kept them from getting food for their household over the last year.
- Similarly, participants in listening sessions overwhelmingly stressed price as the most important factor when deciding where to shop for their food. Participants frequently cited the economic difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the high costs of living as major barriers to accessing the foods that they prefer. Many noted that either they or a family member lost work during the pandemic and had to contend with this loss of income and rising food prices to be able to feed their families. Others cited persisting medical bills and the responsibility of feeding extended family members as major barriers to accessing the foods they need and prefer. The increase in the cost of living and food forced many of the participants to live in a state of insecurity regarding how they would pay their bills and feed their families.
- The need to cover other expenses, such as childcare and to provide food for many family members, further compounds the effects of the high cost of food relative to income. For example, mothers of small children faced the issue of whether to send their kids to daycare. These mothers cited the high prices of daycares as a reason to keep them home instead. This results in them staying home, limiting their family income and creating a need to purchase more food to feed their children during the day.
- Mothers with large families emphasized the difficulties in buying enough food. Many cited that halfway through the week, their weekly shop runs out. Three women also detailed that they had trouble feeding a family of their size using food distribution sites because they often were forced to wait in line two or three times to be able to collect the amount of food they needed.

Accessibility of affordable food retailers and assistance sites as well as cultural relevance are other factors that influence how families with children access food. Participants in community engagement activities also reported not being able to find the types of food preferred or needed by their families as well as transportation-related issues as barriers to food access.

- Approximately a quarter (25%) of survey respondents in food-insecure households reported not being able to find the food they want or need as a factor that kept them from getting food for their household over the last year.

- In general, food-secure households are more likely to get food from grocery stores (69%) than food-insecure households (50%). Food-insecure households are more likely to use food banks, pantries, or community food distribution sites (43%) than food-secure households (19%).
- Participants in listening sessions mentioned supermarkets like Aldi and Megamart as their favorite markets because of their cheaper prices. Other participants shared that they go to Safeway, Walmart, and Sam's Club also due to their cheaper prices. A few participants shared that they go to H-Mart for culturally relevant Latin foods. The English-speaking group noted that they frequent Giant, Whole Foods, international markets, and African stores; they concluded, however, that they ultimately look for the best deals.
- Food-secure households were significantly more likely to drive to obtain food (70%), whereas food-insecure households rely equally on walking (24%), driving (20%), biking (20%), and public transportation (19%).
- Two participants in listening sessions cited the barriers they face without a car. They shared that the amount of time and energy it takes to use public transit to access markets and food assistance makes it much harder. As noted, participants with large families faced even more transportation-related challenges in buying enough food. The need to use public transit to travel to markets or food assistance sites posed additional barriers to these participants' ability to acquire and transport enough food for their families.
- Participants in listening sessions overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of having fresh fruits and vegetables in the home. Overall, participants' food preferences are highly influenced by nutritional value and cultural relevance. Certain fruits and vegetables were stressed in the Spanish-speaking focus groups for their cultural relevance, such as plantains, masa, beans, yuca, elote (corn), mango, and nopales (cactus). Participants relayed the importance of having these foods for the health of their children and family. Participants expressed the importance of having milk, formula, eggs, chicken, fish, yogurt, cereal, and snacks as their specific preferences for their children's food. One participant stressed the importance of having healthy foods because she has an obese child and a diabetic husband. One participant stressed needing gluten-free and sugar-free foods for her autistic son, which can be very expensive. The English-speaking group expressed wanting low-sodium and low-fat foods and foods with whole grains. An African immigrant participant noted her preference for yams and dried fish.

Utilization and Experience with Food Assistance Resources

Overall, most participants in community engagement activities have used or know about food assistance resources; however, some of them are still unaware of where to go or how to ask for help. Many participants in community engagement activities reported being aware of or using food assistance resources. However, some reported not knowing where to go to get assistance or how to ask for help.

- Overall, 75% of survey respondents reported being enrolled in food benefit programs such as SNAP, WIC, and FARMS, while 70% (n = 1,315) reported receiving food distribution assistance (e.g., food banks, pantries, and/or other community distribution or meal programs).

programs). More than half of the survey respondents, 63% (n = 1,315) reported participating in both food assistance and benefits programs.

- Almost all listening session participants were aware of one or more food distribution sites, particularly of the facilitating organizations. Participants shared that they have gone to churches, schools, and other food distribution sites for food assistance. Members of the Spanish-speaking groups shared that they usually find out about these sites from friends, non-profit community organizations, WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and the County website.
- Approximately a quarter (24%) of survey respondents with food-insecure households reported not being sure where to go to get food assistance as a factor that kept them from getting food for their household over the last year.
- Approximately two-fifths (41%) of all survey participants not receiving food assistance (n = 391) reported that they did not know how to ask for help. One-third (32%) of those not enrolled in benefit programs (n = 324) reported that they did not know how to apply.
- Participants in two listening sessions noted that they knew they could call 311 to learn about food assistance resources; however, they found it generally unhelpful, describing the experience as getting “the runaround.”

Although residents appreciate the assistance offered through community and school-based food distribution programs, they described issues with the quality and cultural appropriateness of the products offered. Many of the listening session participants expressed their gratitude for the availability of food assistance support in general and for the help they received from the facilitating organizations. However, they described issues faced with the quality and cultural relevance of the food received.

- Participants in two listening sessions spoke at length on the issue of receiving expired foods and being unsure about their quality even when frozen. Some participants said they always throw away food received past its expiration date. One mother cooked chicken four days past its due date, and her children got sick. Participants appreciated the class that Manna offers on food storage and nutrition labels to address some of these concerns.
- Many of the Spanish-speaking groups noted that food assistance sites rarely have the fresh, culturally appropriate Latin foods they prefer. Mothers of school-aged children in these groups also shared that they were unhappy with the quality of the school meals their children receive and how culturally different they are from what they eat at home.
- The English-speaking focus group had mixed feelings about the quality of school lunches, with some complaining about the quality and taste, while others shared that they were happy with the nutritional value and amount of food their children receive.

The complexity of application processes, including the lack of staff with the cultural and linguistic skills to help residents most in need, is the main factor affecting enrollment in benefits programs. Most participants in listening sessions were aware of the major benefits programs and agreed that these are helpful resources when received. However, conversations around these programs largely skewed

- Participants in the Spanish-speaking listening sessions shared that they felt discriminated against for their race, inability to speak English, and lack of documents when applying for public food assistance programs like SNAP and WIC. The participants have found that the lack of Spanish-speaking staff at government agencies and the disrespect they have experienced there to be a major barrier to accessing food assistance.
- Language access was a frequently cited barrier among participants in being able to fill out and ask questions about application forms. Another frequently cited issue among immigrant participants was that they lacked the paperwork needed to apply because they are paid without taxes being withheld.
- Others found the paperwork very confusing and difficult to fill out or edit because they lack access to a computer or do not have computer skills. One woman noted she attempted to apply for benefits but was declined and was never told why. She had to get help from an organization in Gaithersburg to access benefits.

Strategies to Address Food Access Barriers

In the short term, focus should be placed on increasing sustained participation in assistance programs by engaging trusted community institutions and building providers' capacity to work with the communities most in need. Feedback from residents participating in community engagement activities points to the vital role of faith-based organizations, children and youth-serving institutions, and healthcare providers as important food assistance access points. Residents also reported that increasing food benefit amounts and accessibility of food assistance programs would make it easier for them to get food for their households. However, there is a need to build the capacity of service agencies and staff to facilitate access to this support among the communities most in need.

- Survey participants overall were most likely to seek help from a food bank or pantry. Food insecure households were next most likely to reach out to a church or faith-based organization (73%), a community organization or neighborhood group (71%), and/or schools (70%). Respondents from food-insecure households were significantly more likely to seek future help, if needed, from church or faith-based organizations, healthcare providers, or childcare providers.
- Near the end of the survey, respondents were asked to choose two aspects that would make it easier to get food for their household from a list. For food insecure households, the top three food resources desired included increased food benefit amounts (36%), food assistance programs that are more accessible (35%), and gift cards to buy groceries (29%).
- Participants in Spanish-speaking listening sessions felt their communities generally lacked information on where to access and find out about food assistance resources and how to benefit from public programs. They stressed the importance of increasing the Spanish-speaking staff of the County to increase their capacity to help communicate how to navigate the process.

English-Speaking Listening Session Feedback

- The participants in the English-speaking listening session stressed the need for more after-school programs and better resources and capacity for such programs. This group also stressed their desire to see healthier and fresher foods at food distribution sites and better job training programs to help them achieve the income they need to no longer need assistance.

Long-Term Strategies

In the long term, continue to advocate and promote strategies to lower the cost of living and increase families' income. Community feedback on strategies to address systemic barriers to food access centered on ways to lower the cost of living.

Spanish-Speaking Focus Group Feedback

- Two Spanish-speaking focus groups agreed that lowering or regulating the price of rent would allow them to have more money to feed their children. Some also noted that lower public transit prices would significantly decrease how much they have to spend daily to go to work.
- Other participants cited high medical bills as a reason why they cannot access the food they prefer and would like to see medication costs lowered. One mother noted that she would like to see more institutions that provide toys, clothes, shoes, and backpacks for children.
- Two other participants noted that they want to see better economic opportunities for their community so they can earn a decent living to afford the foods they want.



Figure 23: Official seal of Montgomery County, Maryland. The circular seal displays the words “Montgomery County Maryland” around a central heraldic shield topped with a knight’s helmet and decorative mantling. The shield contains fleur-de-lis symbols and circular emblems, and the year 1776 appears on either side, with a banner reading “Garde Bien.”

Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger



Figure 24: Photo collage of children eating a variety of meals and snacks. The images show children seated at tables in school cafeterias and home environments, holding trays or bowls with fruits, vegetables, grains, and prepared dishes. The collage emphasizes access to nutritious food and diverse meal settings.