

ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY IN ULSTER COUNTY



Chelsea Villalba, MSW
Eve Walter, PhD
Spring 2022

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Introduction

Ulster County is home to a thriving and diverse agricultural industry, and though attempts by existing networks to bridge the gap between those in need and healthy, accessible food continue, food insecurity persists in the county, especially amongst marginalized youth and communities. Food insecurity, defined as having reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet (low food security), or having multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (very low food insecurity)¹ is a primary social determinant of health. This report seeks to illustrate the experiences of food insecurity in Ulster County, the efforts to reduce it, and potential opportunities to further assure no one in the county is ever again food insecure.

As with any research using Census, federal, state, or local data, the statements made in this report are estimations only. While the information used gives a clear snapshot of the rates of food insecurity and poverty in Ulster County, it is by no means definitive, and is not fully representational of residents who live in poverty and are unable to apply for and receive benefit programs. Whether due to lack of means (transportation, time, access to internet); immigration status; mental, emotional, or intellectual health conditions; or lack of awareness of programs available to them, food insecure individuals can face numerous barriers to reliable, healthy food sources.

Understanding the Need

Effects of Hunger on Health

Experiencing frequent hunger has dangerous and long-lasting effects on the human body. Feeding America reports that hunger negatively impacts mental health across all age groups, affects youth school performance and can be hard to identify in students.² According to the USDA, there are strong correlations between low food security and the probability of working-age adults with chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, hepatitis, stroke, cancer, asthma, arthritis, and diabetes.³ Mitigating food insecurity would lessen the factors negatively affecting residents' health, academic performance, and lifetime earning potential.⁴ Scientific evidence shows that hunger has long-term physical and psychological consequences, and serious implications for public health.⁵

Prenatal and child hunger is associated with increased risk of birth defects, anemia, lower nutrient intake, deficiencies in cognitive development, aggression, anxiety, hospitalization and poorer general health, asthma, behavioral problems, depression, suicidal ideation, and worse oral health.⁵ Research indicates that food-insecure seniors are more likely to have poorer health, higher rates of depression, lower nutrient intakes, and limitations to daily life activities compared to their food-secure counterparts.⁵ Additionally, the stress associated with food insecurity may increase the risk of peripheral insulin resistance, a precursor to diabetes. Food-insecure adults report more difficulties affording a diabetic diet and lower abilities to address issues relating to diabetes than food-secure persons.⁵

On average, food insecurity is associated with higher health care costs.⁶ It is estimated that food insecure individuals had annual healthcare expenditures that were over \$1,800 higher than their food secure counterparts.⁶ Food insecurity and hunger impair human capital formation and diminish existing human capital, leading to higher costs, productivity loss, and reduced business success.⁷ The reduction of food insecurity and hunger is cost-effective, supports social and economic equity, and provides a serious investment in the health and wellness of children who will grow up to be the workforce, parents, and leaders of the future.

Poverty in Ulster County, NY

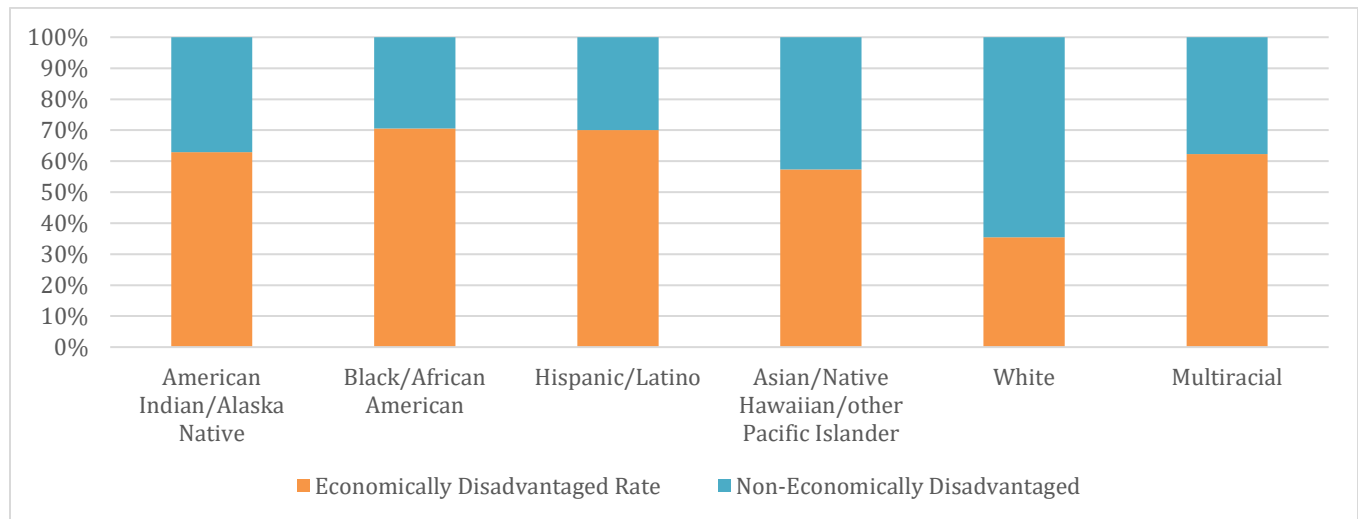
The U.S. [Census Bureau](#) estimates that one in every seven Ulster County residents lives in poverty (14%), with the highest rate among children under age 18 (16%).⁸ The New York State Education Department reported that in the 2020-2021 academic year, 47% of students (9,860) enrolled in public schools were categorized as 'economically disadvantaged'.⁹ Students identified as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native have the highest rates of economic disadvantage, relative to their size (Fig. 1).¹⁰

Food Insecurity in Ulster County, NY

Persons living in poverty are at highest risk of experiencing food insecurity. The Ulster County Community Health Assessment by the Department of Health reports that, in comparison with neighboring counties, Ulster County has historically had one of the highest rates of food insecurity, and the lowest rate of adults who report consuming less than one fruit and less than one vegetable daily.¹⁰ This suggests that the majority of Ulster County residents understand the importance of fresh produce in healthy diet. In terms of access and affordability to food, Ulster

County scored lowest amongst surrounding counties.¹⁰ It is projected that in 2021, around 21,954 people living in Ulster County (12%) were food insecure, with a 17% rate of child food insecurity.¹¹ The top five municipalities in Ulster County with the highest rates of persons living below the poverty line are: 1. Shandaken (24%); 2. Shawangunk (21%); 3. Wawarsing (20%); 4. City of Kingston City (19%); and 5. Esopus (16%).¹²

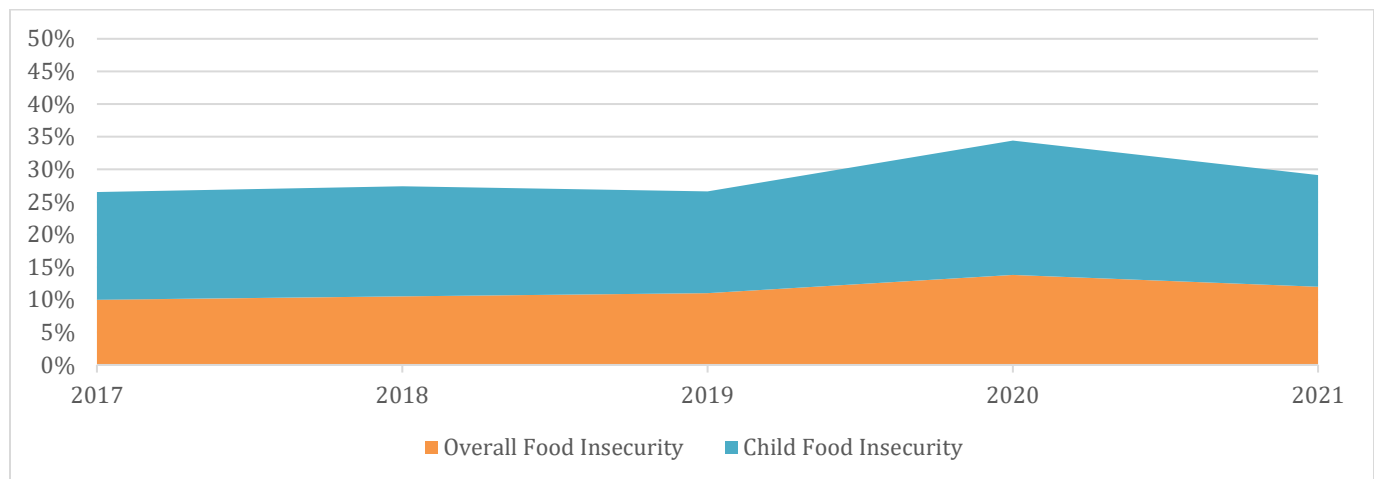
Figure 1. Economically Disadvantaged Students in Gr. K-12, Ulster County Public Schools 2020-2021



Source: New York State Department of Education, Ulster County Public School Enrollment (2020-2021)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity in Ulster County showed a decline amongst children, but an increase overall (Fig. 2).¹³ However, at the onset of the pandemic, Ulster County experienced increases in both overall and child food insecurity, as well as overall poverty. Food insecurity rates have remained higher than those in 2019 and are projected to increase.¹¹ In 2021, overall food insecurity in Ulster County increased by nine percent and child food insecurity increased by six percent from 2019 figures. “Very low” food security, in which persistent hunger is more likely, increased by nine percent overall and eleven percent among children during the same period.¹¹

Figure 2. Food Insecurity Ulster County 2017-2021

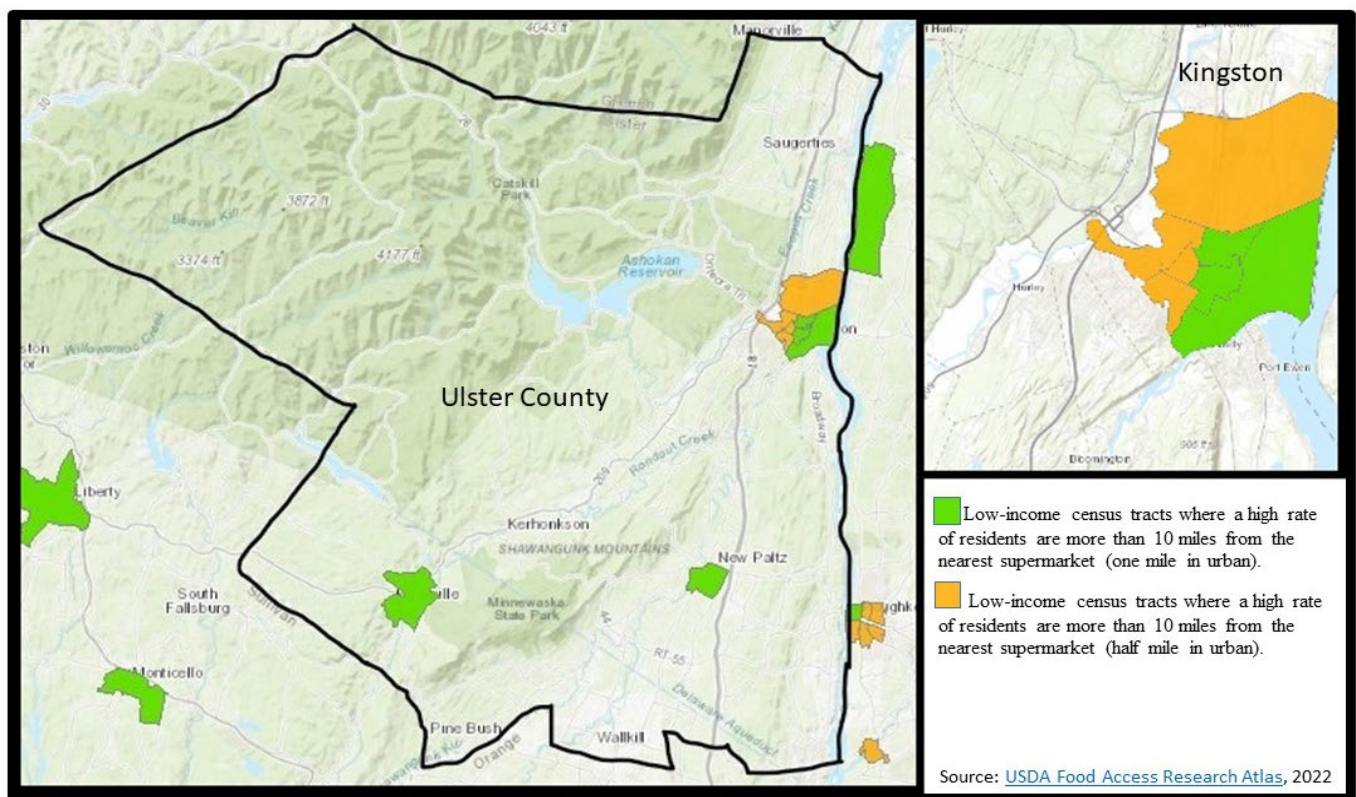


Source: Feeding America. (2020). Food Insecurity in Ulster County Before COVID-19

Food Deserts in Ulster County, NY

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Access Research Atlas¹⁴ measures and compares food access by income, physical access, and census tracts to identify Low-Income and Low Access (LILA) areas, formerly known as food deserts. LILA areas are defined by the number of residents who live outside of a supermarket's radius (defined by geographic type and vehicle access). In Ulster County, there are nine census tracts that fall into this LILA category: one in New Paltz, one in Ellenville, and seven in the city of Kingston¹⁴ (Fig. 3). At least 38% of the population, disproportionately Black and Latino, do not live near or have access to adequate food outlets.¹⁵ It is estimated that food insecure individuals in Ulster County spend almost \$46 million more in health care costs than food secure residents.⁶ In 2019, the annual food budget shortfall for Ulster County was \$12,045,000.¹⁷

Figure 3. Map of Low-Income, Low Access areas in Ulster County



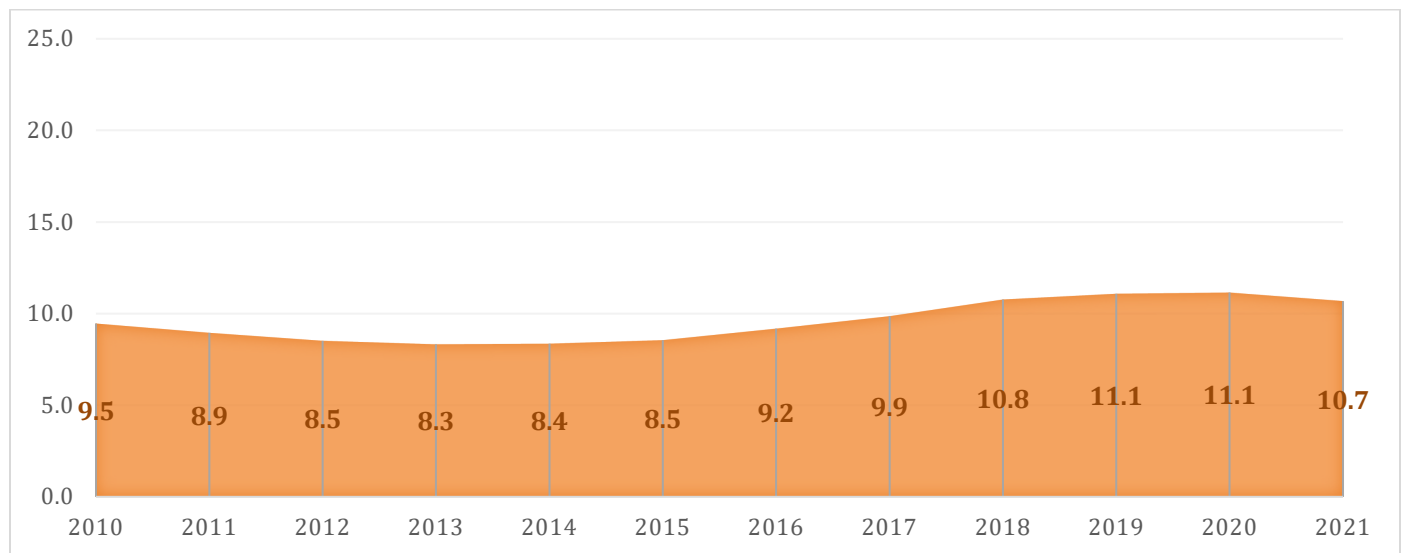
In March 2019, a service provider survey, and focus groups of underrepresented populations including low-income earners, veterans, persons experiencing homelessness, the aging population, LGBTQ+ community, and people with mental health and/or substance use disorder diagnoses, identified “access to affordable, reliable public and personal transportation” as the second most important underlying issue impacting their health.¹⁰ Low-Income, Low Access areas would cease to exist if businesses that accept SNAP and WIC, and offered fresh, healthy and affordable foods were located in these areas. In addition to availability, access remains a major obstacle to these populations. Currently, Ulster County Area Transit has rules that limit the amount of shopping bags a passenger can carry at a time.¹⁶

Ulster County Resources to Combat Food Insecurity

Public Programs

Recent estimates show that less than 30% of eligible Ulster County residents participate in Women, Infants, Children (WIC) services.¹⁸ Single mothers historically have the highest rates of poverty.¹⁹ WIC offers many benefits including nutritious food vouchers, nutrition education and counseling, health screenings and referrals, breastfeeding support, and the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.²⁰ The utilization rate of the Federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)²¹ in Ulster County is approximately 11% (Fig. 4), with the highest rates in: 1. The City of Kingston (20%), 2. Wawarsing (18%), and 3. Marbletown (17%).²²

Figure 4. SNAP Enrollment in Ulster County 2010-2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2020). Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) using ACS 5-Year Estimates.

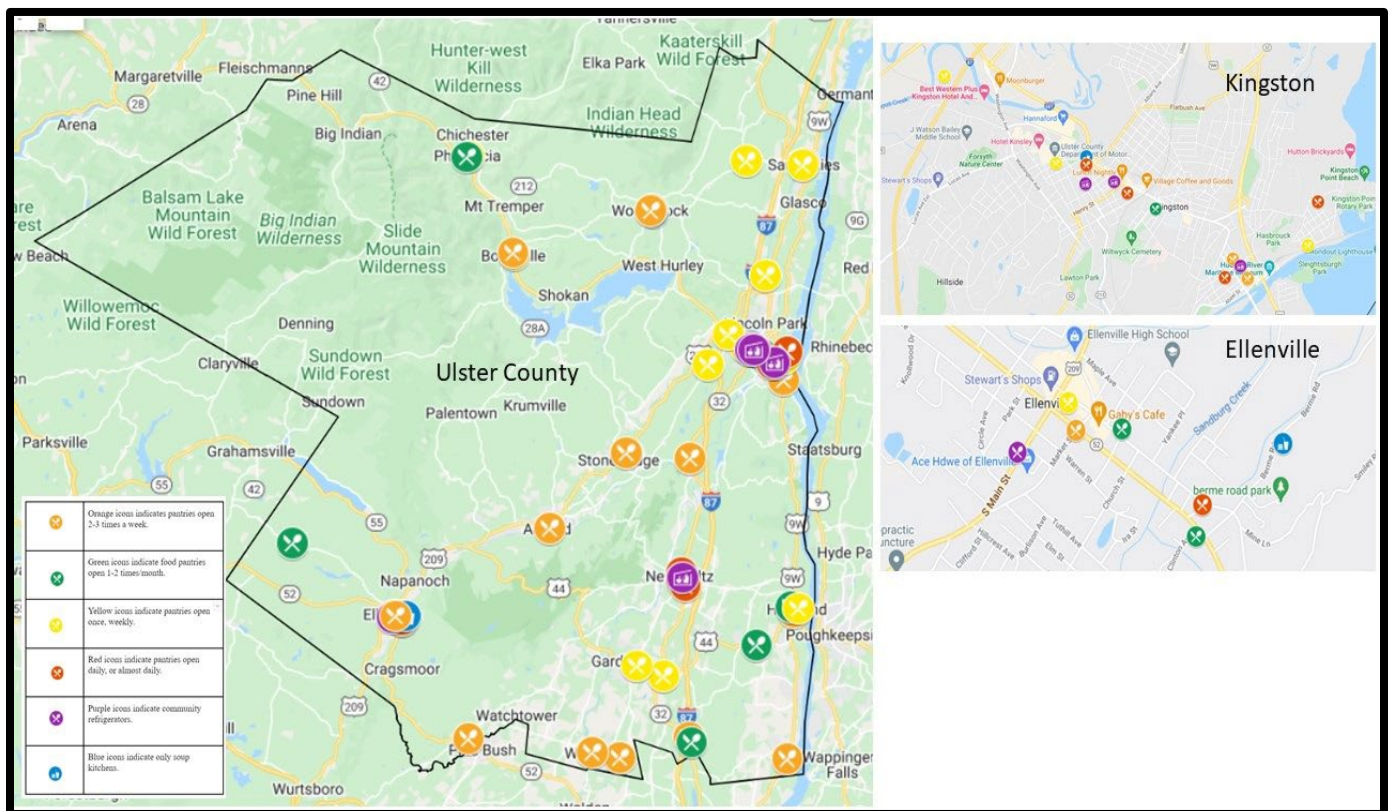
The majority of SNAP participants are families with children.²³ Low-income residents can face numerous challenges when attempting to apply for SNAP including: application time (at least one hour), resources (phone, internet access, transport), provision of income documentation and other personal information, and availability to interview with the local agency. In some cases, there may be delays between application, approval and benefit start date. Further, public-facing information on applying for SNAP and WIC, resources to protect against food-insecurity, and other food safety net programs, are often unavailable in Spanish, the second most spoken language in the county, and other languages. Of note, 11% of people living in Ulster County report speaking a non-English language at home.²⁴ According to a recent Mid-Hudson Region Community Health Survey, health providers reported that the top four barriers to people achieving better health in Ulster County were: 1. knowledge of existing resources, 2. geographic location, such as living in a rural area, 3. drug and/or alcohol use, and 4. access to affordable, nutritious food.¹⁰

Food Security Networks

Food Pantries, Soup Kitchens & Meal Delivery in Ulster County

Ulster County has taken many steps to address food insecurity. Local non-profits, community organizations and religious institutions comprise a large portion of the agencies dedicated to feeding hungry residents in the county though community food pantries. At least 49 food pantries, four soup kitchens, and two meal delivery programs are listed online in Ulster County (Fig. 4, Appendix A). There are eleven food pantries in the county that operate four or more times a week. Other food pantries are open bi-weekly or monthly. Some food pantries have a limitation on the frequency with which an individual or family can be provided food (e.g., once or twice a month), and many provide only a three-day food package to families.²⁵ Four soup kitchens serve full, well-balanced “hot” meals to the public and are open daily during the week. Two meal delivery programs deliver food to the homes of individuals who are chronically ill or homebound.

Figure 4. Food Networks in Ulster County, 2022



Community Refrigerators

There are three community refrigerators in the City of Kingston, and one in the Village of New Paltz. Community refrigerators, also known as “free food fridges,” “community fridges,” or “freedges,” are refrigerators placed in accessible community areas that may be used by anyone anonymously. The fridges are typically stocked and maintained by volunteers, though any community member or business can donate goods to the fridge if the donors follow the donation protocols in place by the organization maintaining the fridge. These “free fridges” allow for

anonymity for the recipient, as many food pantries require documentation of food seeker's address, contact information, income, or other personal information. Further, this resource may also assist persons who have exhausted their visits to local food pantries and are ineligible or unable to apply to SNAP for any reason. There is no guarantee that an individual seeking food in the fridge will find culturally appropriate, or any, food to eat or prepare. Some fridges also have restrictions on what foods are allowed to be stored in the fridge (vegetarian or plant-based).

Farm-to-School Programs

Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) of Ulster County, a statewide educational non-profit, partnered with the Rondout Valley Growers Association and other organizations to develop the "Just-a-Bite" farm-to-school program in Ellenville.²⁶ This program aims to expand its access to healthy food and healthy eating education for school children, bridge financial gaps for school cafeterias to purchase locally-grown foods, fund trips for students to working farms in the Rondout Valley, and launch a pilot program to supply free fresh food boxes for families in Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) schools. CEP is a federal provision that allows high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students.²⁷ Farm-to-school programs are part of the state's "No Student Goes Hungry" initiative, and seek to prepare children to learn, enhance academic performance, improve health and well-being, strengthen the local economy, and build healthier communities.²⁸ There are 10 school districts in Ulster County, with a total of 52 schools. Most county youth will participate in education at these sites.

Farm-to-Food Pantry Program

Since 2009, the Rondout Valley Growers Association's Farm-to-Food Pantry Program has collected donated food from local farms and distributed it to organizations in Ulster County "with the goal of increasing access to local food in food deserts and areas of poverty."²⁹ This program operates in partnership with Family of Woodstock, UlsterCorps, Ulster County Community Action, and the Hudson Valley Farm Hub. Volunteers "glean," or harvest produce left in farm fields throughout the growing season. The growing season is extended by processing foods into locally produced canned and frozen foods, and the food is distributed to food pantries, shelters, and community meal programs. In 2020, the farm-to-food pantry program distributed almost 200,000 pounds of local produce to 61 local community organizations.²⁹ In 2021, UlsterCorps collected and distributed over 150,000 pounds of produce throughout Ulster and Greene Counties.³⁰

Community Supported Agriculture Programs (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, is a food system model of crop sharing, where consumers buy shares of a farm's harvest in advance. There are multiple CSAs in Ulster County, and some, like Solid Ground Farm in Kingston, participate in a program that offers discounted shares for SNAP recipients and eligible persons.³¹ CSAs run during the growing season, usually between May-November (though some offer winter shares) and provide fresh, local produce weekly or bi-weekly to its customers. Some community supported agriculture programs, like the Phillies Bridge Farm Project in New Paltz, have sliding-scale fees, where high-income earners subsidize shares for low-income customers.³² Community Supported Agriculture offers an alternative resource for residents to obtain produce, as well as eggs, fruit, meat, and cheese, from nearby farms, thereby supporting sustainability goals of reducing food miles (distance food travels to arrive for consumption), while reducing greenhouse gas emissions. CSAs can help families develop healthy eating habits, emphasize the importance of local sustainable food sources, and foster stronger community connections. In joining a CSA, consumers and growers provide each other mutual

support and share the risks and benefits of a community farm's food production together.³³ Additionally, five farmers markets in Ulster County (Phoenicia, Saugerties, Woodstock, Kingston, and Rosendale) accept SNAP, or are part of the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, providing opportunities for benefit recipients to obtain fresh, local produce.³⁴

Other Programs

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County has previously provided county residents with nutrition education workshops and is well-suited to implement food growing programs in small/community gardens, especially in LILA areas. Currently, the Kingston Library provides a local Tool and Gardening Library, where patrons may check out seeds and tools to start their own vegetable garden. The Kingston Land Trust connects individuals to land they can use to grow food. There are many opportunities for increased public engagement using these programs. Growing one's own food is also environmentally conscious due to the absence of packaging, storage, and transportation to stores, and can help produce culturally relevant food.

Conclusion

Two key elements, financial access and environmental access interchange to create chronic food insecurity. In Ulster County, we are home to approximately one in seven residents living in poverty with the highest rates among children, particularly children of color. While eligible for food assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC, many do not utilize these services and noted barriers exist to making these services more broadly accessed such as active efforts to encourage increased use and educational materials that address non-English speakers. Notably, many county-level efforts are in place such as food pantries, soup kitchens, meal deliveries, community refrigerators, farm-to-school and farm-to-food pantry programs, and Community Supported Agriculture, yet these do not reach all in need. As a result, despite our rich agricultural landscape, we have many in Ulster County living in nationally designated food deserts. These deserts are partially shaped by our transportation system that is not specifically amenable to food shopping.

Making food accessible to food insecure persons through collaborative local efforts and available programs can improve health outcomes of children and families, save money by reducing annual health care expenditures and other costs, increase and strengthen community bonds between residents and local businesses, protect and support the current and future workforce, and increase social equity for low-income individuals and families that experience marginalization, especially Black, Hispanic, and other people of color disproportionately affected by poverty. When individuals and families experience food insecurity that leads to hunger, the health implications are serious and long-lasting, negatively impacting mental and physical health.

Evidence shows that reducing food insecurity improves residents' health and lifetime earning potential, improves students' academic performance, and reduces health care expenditures for issues related to chronic hunger. Further, addressing food insecurity by local means is a powerful form of sustainable development, ensuring communities' resilience to the effects of climate change. When communities increase food security through local food networks and farms, their food miles decrease, this leads to fewer greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, the personal stake of knowing exactly where one's food comes from can strengthen the connection between individuals and their

environment, inspiring environmental action to protect agricultural and park lands, further ensuring the health and safety of residents.

Recommended Solutions for Ulster County to Address Hunger

Treating food access as a basic human right, and not a privilege, will provide measurable benefit to Ulster County residents. The American Bar Association states that “hunger safety net policies fail to recognize the need to eliminate poverty as a first step to eliminating hunger.”³⁵ Expanding eligibility for food assistance programs, improving application infrastructure and support, and providing multi-lingual education and access will bring food security within reach of children and families in need. Interventions tailored to individual food insecure communities should increase food access in ways that reflect the unique needs and challenges of the area, improve access to farms, address income inequity, and enhance reliable public transportation.

There are several ways Ulster County can continue to bridge the gap between food assistance services and food insecure residents. Recommendations include:

- Incorporating food insecure people in discussions about county goals and hunger prevention policies. This is crucial for equitable and just leadership.
- Ensuring that all forms of communications from the county including printed materials and websites, contain information about food assistance programs and safety nets are accessible in intelligible Spanish, and organized in a way that easily engages the public in seeking help feeding their families.
- Ensuring that public or low-cost transportation is fully accessible for people in low-income areas to travel to places where food is available for affordable purchase or gratuitous distribution.
- Incentivizing retailers or business owners to sell healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods and accept food assistance programs in Low-Income, Low Access areas.
- Supporting the expansion of local farm-to-school and food pantry programs that feed and educate youth and marginalized communities on healthy nutrition habits and cooking.
- Enhancing efforts to inform families living below or near the poverty line of opportunities to connect with food safety nets and other assistance, especially minority populations, seniors, and single-mothers.
- Implementing processes to support increased collaboration of organizations to expand outreach and marketing of assistance services and food safety network programs through public school engagement and at health checkpoints, and an up-to-date food referral system.

Appendices

Appendix A: [Food Resources in Ulster County](#)

<p>Esopus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Port Ewen Food Pantry at the Esopus United Methodist Church <p>Gardiner</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ St. Charles Helping Hands Food Pantry <p>Hurley</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ St. Joseph's Mission Church <p>Kingston (City)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Catholic Charities of Kingston Food Pantry ◦ Heavenbound Food Pantry ◦ Church of the Holy Cross/Santa Cruz; Ulster Immigrant Defense Network ◦ Happy to Help Food Pantry ◦ People's Place Food Pantry/Soup Kitchen (People's Cafe)** ◦ Point of Praise Food Pantry ◦ Ulster County Community Action Food Pantry** ◦ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Food Pantry** ◦ New Central Baptist Church Food Pantry ◦ Crossroads Christian Fellowship (Community Meal) ◦ Salvation Army of Kingston Food Pantry** ◦ Clinton Ave United Methodist Church Food Pantry/Soup Kitchen** 	<p>Lloyd/(Highland)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Family Outreach Food Pantry ◦ Ulster County Community Action - Highland Pantry ◦ St. Augustine Parish Food Pantry ◦ Ascension Holy Food Trinity Food Pantry <p>Marbletown/(Stone Ridge)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Rondout Valley Food Pantry <p>Marlborough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Saint Mary's Rectory Food Pantry <p>New Paltz</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Family of New Paltz** ◦ St. Joseph's Catholic Church** ◦ SUNY New Paltz Food Pantry** <p>Olive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Reservoir Food Pantry ◦ The Table at Woodstock <p>Plattekill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Modena United Methodist Church ◦ New Day Tabernacle Cathedral ◦ Our Lady of Fatima Church <p>Rochester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Rochester Food Pantry <p>Rosendale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Rosendale Food Pantry <p>Saugerties</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ God Given Bread Food Pantry at Atonement Lutheran Church ◦ Saugerties Food Pantry ◦ St. John the Evangelist Church 	<p>Shandaken</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Phoenicia United Methodist Church Hall Food Pantry ◦ Helping Hands of NY <p>Shawangunk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Pine Bush Ecumenical Food Pantry ◦ Loaves & Fishes Food Pantry at Wallkill Reformed Church ◦ His Love Unveiled Food Pantry at Mid-Hudson Christian Church <p>Ulster/(Lake Katrine)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Bread of Life Food Pantry <p>Wawarsing/(Ellenville)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Ulster Heights Methodist Church ◦ Seventh-Day Adventist Church ◦ United Methodist Church ◦ Family of Ellenville Food Pantry** ◦ Hosanna Assemblies of God ◦ St. Mary's/St. Andrew's Catholic Church ◦ Ellenville Community Action Food Pantry ◦ Shiloh Baptist Church Soup Kitchen <p>Woodstock</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Family of Woodstock** ◦ Good Neighbor Food Pantry ◦ Daily Bread Soup Kitchen** <p><u>Delivery to ill/homebound</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Angel Food East (Kingston) ◦ Woodstock Area Meals on Wheels
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** Open at least 4+ times a week

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