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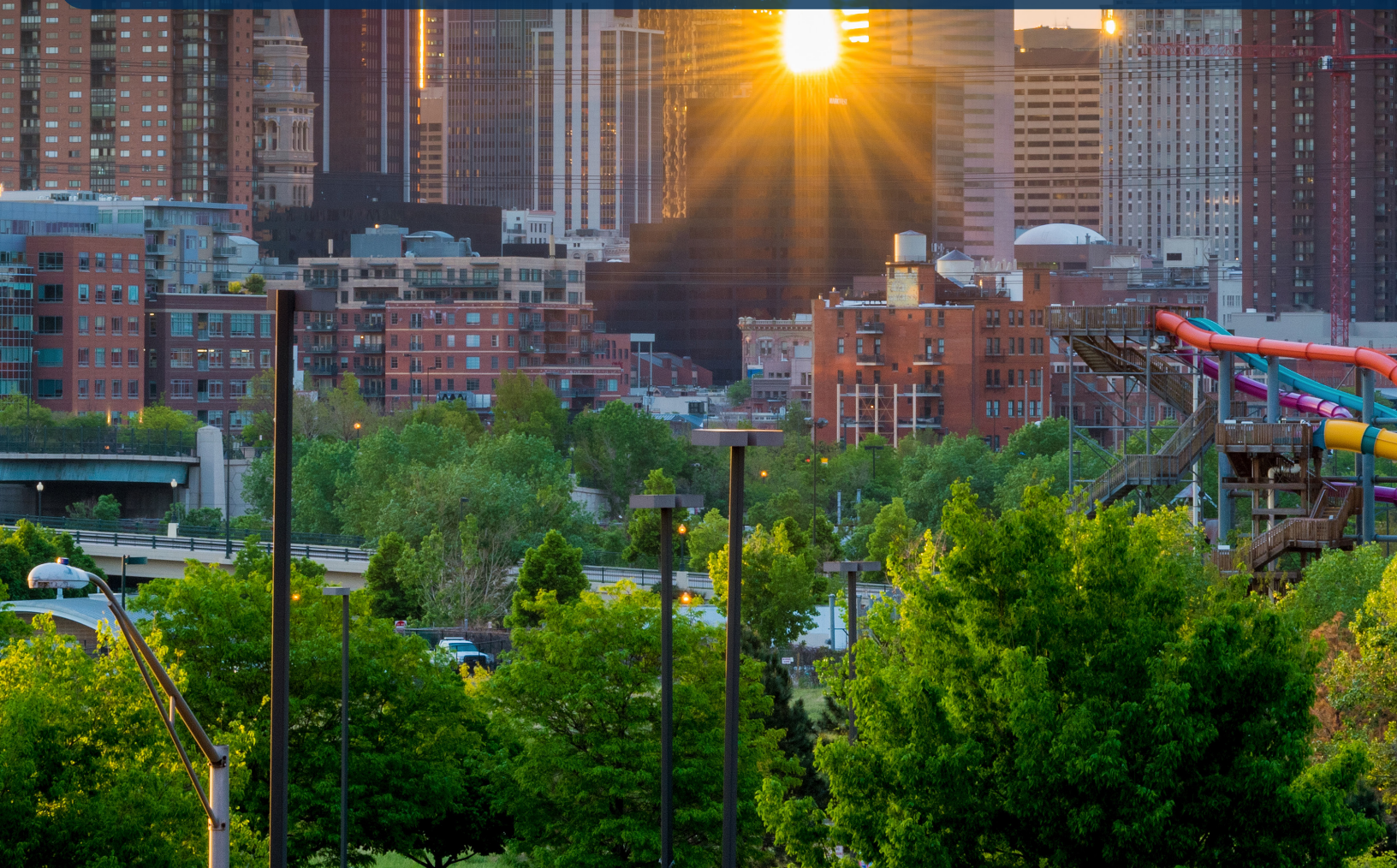
The State of Food Insecurity

March 2026



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Purpose of the Report

This report presents findings from the 2025 Denver Food Insecurity Survey, a follow-up to the City's initial 2024 survey, designed to better understand how Denver residents experience food insecurity and food access. Together, these surveys represent an ongoing effort to move beyond national or state-level estimates and capture local, resident-informed data that reflect Denver's unique economic conditions, neighborhood dynamics, and lived experiences. By continuing this work in 2025, the City and County of Denver seeks to track changes over time, deepen its understanding of persistent gaps, and ensure that policies and programs are grounded in current, local data.

City-level data on food insecurity and food access are limited in many large urban cities, despite significant variation in experiences across neighborhoods and communities. Reliable and local data is essential for understanding complex issues like food insecurity and yet this data is not consistently collected at the municipal level. By collecting this information directly from residents, Denver aims to better reflect the realities of those most impacted and ensure that strategies to address food insecurity are informed by community experience rather than assumptions.

This report is intended to support data-driven and community-led strategies that address food insecurity and advance equitable food access. The 2025 report also serves as a potential model for other cities seeking to prioritize local data collection as a foundation for responsive, equity-centered food policy. By investing in this work, Denver affirms that understanding the problem is a critical step toward building solutions that are sustainable, inclusive, and accountable to the communities they are meant to serve.



2025 Food Insecurity Study Methodology

In November 2025, the Denver Food Insecurity Survey was conducted in partnership with Magellan Strategies, collecting data from a total of 3,046 residents across the City and County of Denver. This large sample size allows the results to reliably reflect the experiences of Denver residents overall. The survey was available in both English and Spanish to increase accessibility. The survey included 33 questions covering key topics such as household food insecurity using standardized USDA measures, food access and shopping experiences, use of food and nutrition assistance, and basic demographic information.

To ensure the findings represent Denver's population as accurately as possible, responses were adjusted to reflect the city's demographics, including gender, age, race and ethnicity, education level, political affiliation, and City Council district. Participants were randomly selected and invited to complete the survey through text messages that included a brief description and a link to the online questionnaire.

Despite the larger sample size in the 2025 survey, the number of respondents in neighborhoods was not equally distributed across all neighborhoods and therefore it is difficult to make statistically significant conclusions for certain neighborhoods. Nevertheless, when the data is aggregated by city council district, which encompasses multiple neighborhoods, the survey captures larger sample sizes and provides a more comprehensive view. For the purposes of this report, relevant data is presented at the city council district level to ensure clarity and accuracy.



Context of Survey Administration

The 2025 Denver Food Insecurity Survey was administered during a period of significant economic and policy disruption that shaped residents' experiences and may have influenced survey responses. While the survey was originally planned for early 2025, a combination of delayed city contracting timelines, staffing reductions, and ongoing budget constraints required the survey administration to be delayed until late fall. At the time the survey was fielded, the federal government experienced the longest shutdown in U.S. history, resulting in delays to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit disbursement. As a result, the federal nutrition assistance program which is intended to reduce food insecurity was at the forefront of public attention and household concern during the survey period. This context may have influenced how respondents perceived and reported their food access and financial stability.

While the timing of the survey may have introduced some response bias, it also underscores a critical finding: one of the most routine aspects of our society, that of food purchasing, is highly sensitive to external economic and policy forces beyond individual or household control. This disruption of an essential program such as SNAP demonstrates how quickly household food stability can be affected by factors at the local, state, and federal level. In this way, this survey provides important insight into the fragility of food security systems and reinforces the need for resilient, flexible, and locally responsive strategies to support Denver residents during periods of uncertainty.



Key Findings: 2025 State of Food Insecurity in Denver

Food insecurity remains widespread in Denver, with many residents facing persistent and severe challenges in meeting their basic food needs. The 2025 food insecurity survey shows that more than one in three adults (35%) reported cutting or skipping meals because they did not have enough money for food, more than double the rate reported in the 2024 survey (15%) (Figure 1.). Among those cutting or skipping meals, nearly half (47%) said this occurred every month, underscoring that food insecurity is an ongoing reality for many households in Denver (Figure 2).

Figure.1 In the last twelve months, did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

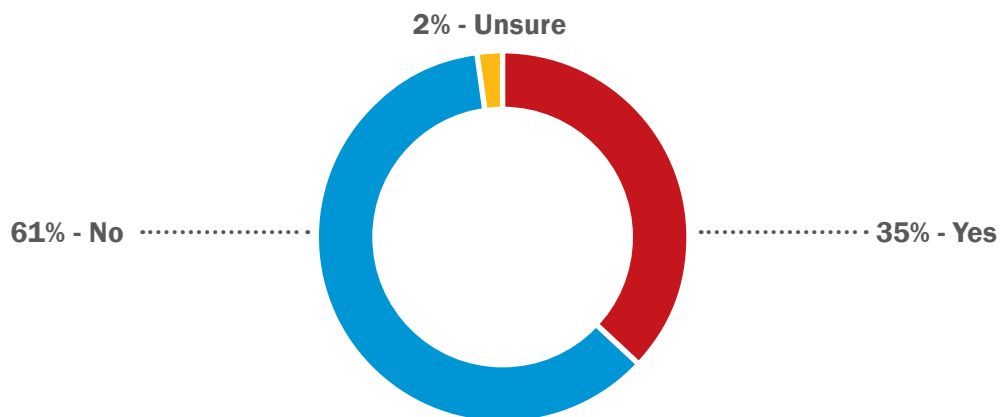
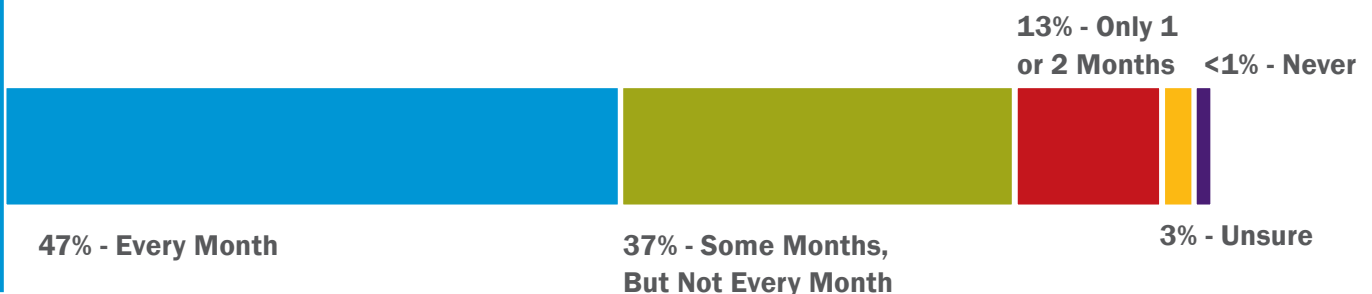
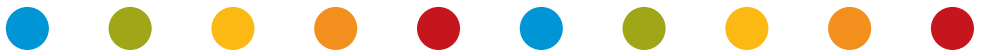


Figure.2 How often did you or other adults in your household cut the size of your meals or skip meals? (Asked to respondents who either them or other adults in household have cut or skipped meals, 1,125n)





Denver's 2025 findings mirror trends seen across the country, highlighting that food insecurity remains a prevalent and unresolved issue nationwide. National data reflect a similar upward trend in food insecurity: according to the November 2025 Consumer Food Insights survey, the U.S. household food insecurity rate rose sharply from 13.3% in October to 16% in November, while food insecurity among SNAP-participating households increased from 36% to 46% over the same period.¹ Surveys conducted in other regions report similarly high rates: the Capital Area Food Bank found that 37% of households in the Washington D.C. metro area experienced food insecurity in 2024 while 2023 study in Massachusetts found that 34% of the state's households were food insecurity.^{2,3} Closer to home, Hunger Free Colorado reported that 33% of Coloradans experienced food insecurity statewide.⁴ Together, these findings demonstrate that Denver's experience is not an outlier, but part of a broader national pattern driven by rising costs, economic instability, and persistent inequities that continue to strain household food budgets.

Food Insecurity, Food Access, and the Economic Reality Facing Denver Residents

Food security and food access are closely related but distinct concepts, and understanding the difference is critical to identifying effective and equitable solutions. Food access refers to the physical availability of food, whether grocery stores, markets, or other food retail options exist within a reasonable distance and can be reached safely and with relative ease. Food security, by contrast, reflects a household's economic and social ability to consistently obtain enough nutritious, culturally relevant food without sacrificing other basic needs.⁵

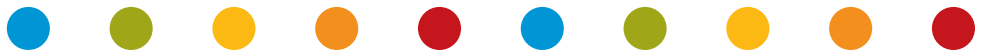
1. Purdue University. (2025). Food insecurity in the United States increased in 2025. Consumer Food Insights.

2. Hunger report 2024. CAFB Hunger Report. (2024, November 4). <https://hunger-report.capitalareafoodbank.org/report-2024/#recommendations-for-addressing-food-insecurity>

3. Cara F. Ruggiero, Man Luo, Catherine Lynn, Kate Adams, Rachel Burgun, Christina Peretti, Daniel Taitelbaum, and Lauren Fiechtner. Food Equity and Access in Massachusetts: Voices and Solutions from Lived Experience. The Greater Boston Food Bank, 2024.

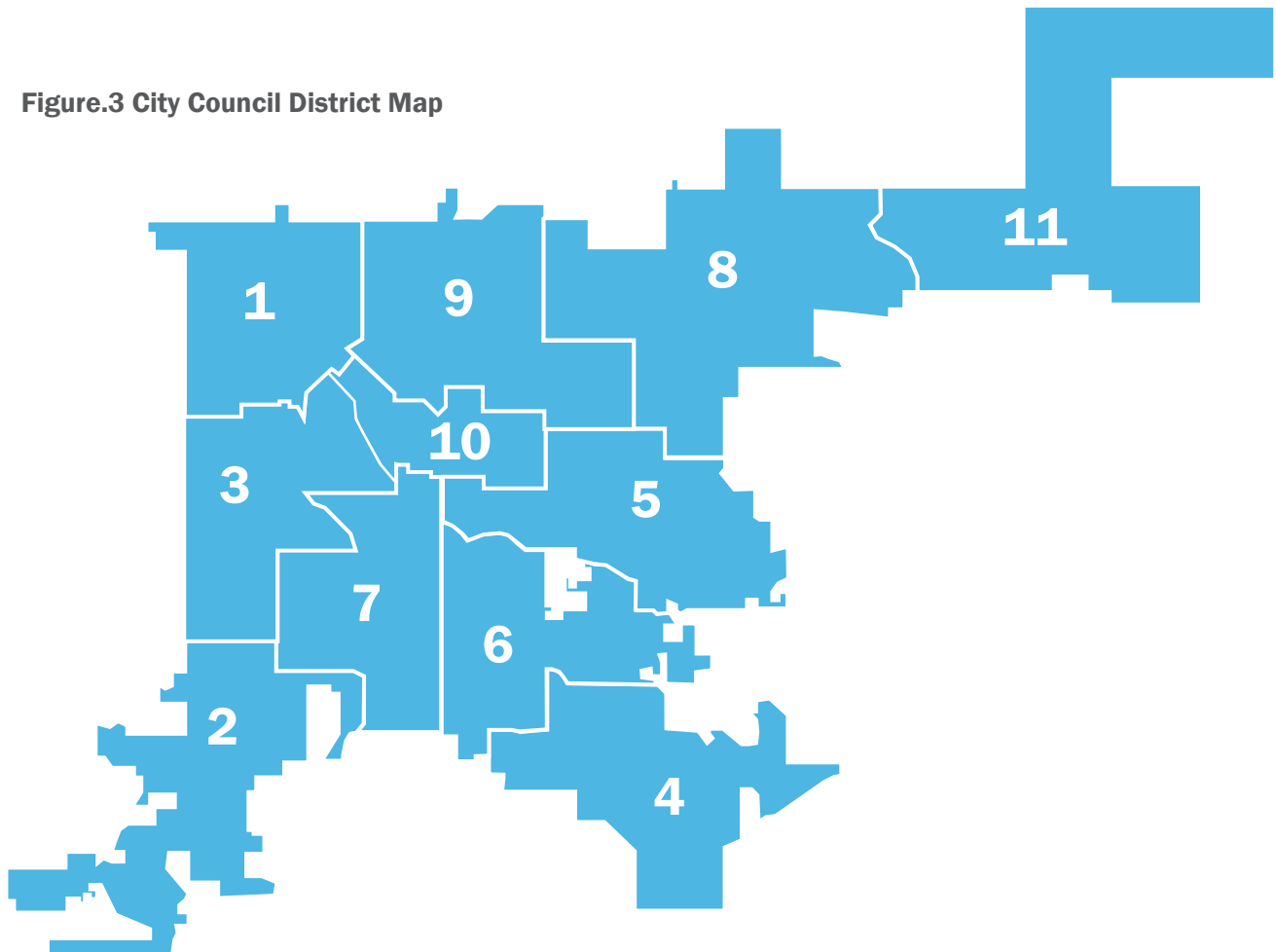
4. Covid Food Insecurity Survey. Hunger Free Colorado. (2021). <https://hungerfreecolorado.org/partner-with-us/initiatives/covid-food-insecurity-survey>

5. Food security in the U.S. - definitions of food security. Food Security in the U.S. - Definitions of Food Security | Economic Research Service. (2025, January 10). <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security>



In Denver, food insecurity is shaped by both long-standing inequities in food access and growing economic pressures. Some neighborhoods, particularly lower-income communities and communities of color, continue to face limited access to full-service grocery stores, reflecting the legacy of food apartheid and structural disinvestment. At the same time, rising food prices and economic instability are increasingly driving food insecurity across the city, including in areas where food is physically available. Together, these dynamics show that food availability does not guarantee affordability or meaningful access.

Figure.3 City Council District Map





Findings from the 2025 Denver Food Insecurity Survey underscore this reality. More than one in three adults reported cutting or skipping meals due to lack of money for food, with rates significantly higher among households earning under \$75,000 and highest among those earning under \$35,000 as well as renters and Hispanic households. Concern about hunger was especially pronounced in City Council Districts 2, 3, and 11, with elevated rates of meal skipping reported in Districts 2, 3, 9, and 11. Among those cutting or skipping meals, nearly half reported doing so every month, indicating that food insecurity is not episodic but persistent.

For many Denver households, food insecurity is rooted in sustained financial strain. As the cost of groceries continues to rise alongside housing, utilities, healthcare, and transportation, residents are increasingly unable to afford basic necessities all at once. Cost is by far the most significant barrier to accessing enough healthy food, with more than two-thirds of residents (68%) identifying food affordability as a major problem across nearly every demographic group and district. (Figure 4).



Figure.4 People face different challenges when trying to get enough healthy food. How much of a problem is each of the following for you and your household?

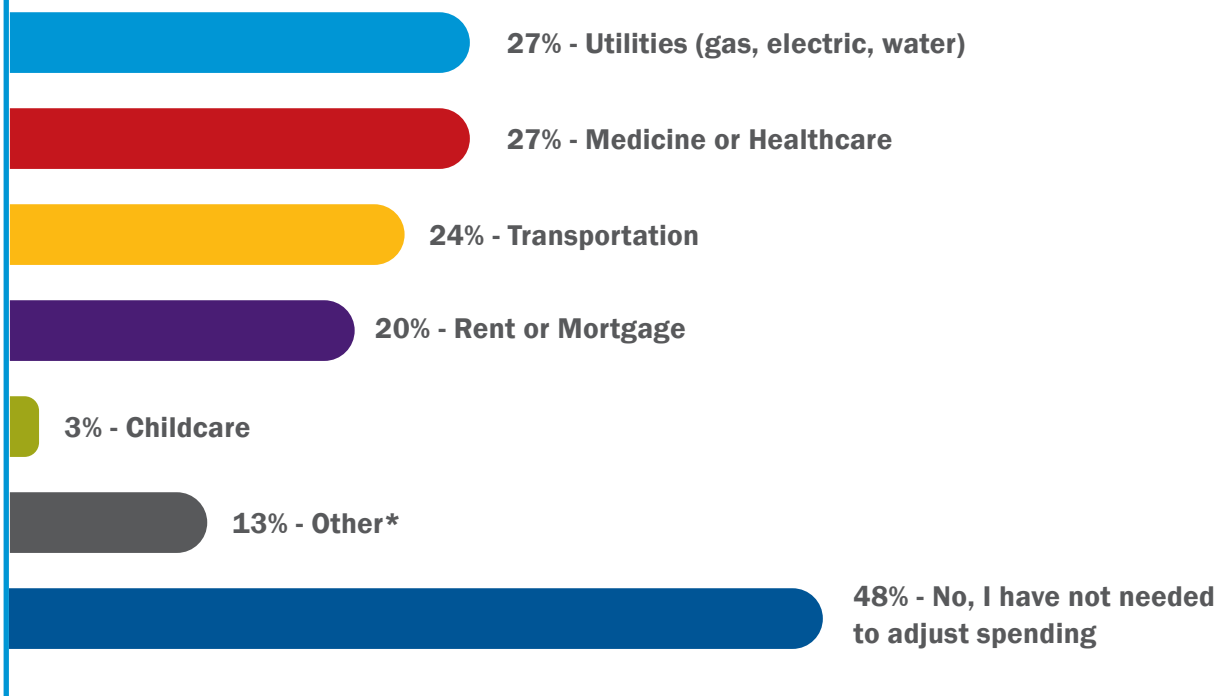
Response	Big & Somewhat Combined	Big Problem	Somewhat of a Problem	Not Much of a Problem	Not a Problem at All	Not applicable
Food is too expensive	68%	36%	32%	16%	11%	5%
I don't have space or resources to grow my own food	46%	23%	23%	15%	17%	22%
Stores nearby don't sell healthy or fresh foods	30%	10%	20%	26%	36%	8%
There aren't enough food pantries or free food options nearby	25%	11%	14%	9%	18%	48%
It's hard to walk or travel safely to places that sell food	20%	8%	12%	13%	43%	24%
Stores don't carry the types of foods I or my family like to eat	17%	4%	13%	28%	45%	10%
I don't have reliable transportation to get to stores or pantries	15%	8%	7%	10%	46%	29%
Stores don't accept SNAP, WIC, or Double Up Food Bucks	9%	4%	5%	9%	19%	63%



To cope, households are forced into difficult trade-offs that further compromise their stability and well-being. Over one-quarter of respondents reported cutting back on utilities (27%) and healthcare or medications (27%) to afford food, while others reduced spending on transportation (24%) or rent and mortgage payments (20%). These trade-offs highlight the intersectionality of food insecurity with the built environment, health outcomes, and overall economic security (Figure 5).



Figure.5 In the past 12 months, have you needed to cut back or adjust spending on any of the following to afford food? (Select all that apply) (Answers will add up to more than 100%)

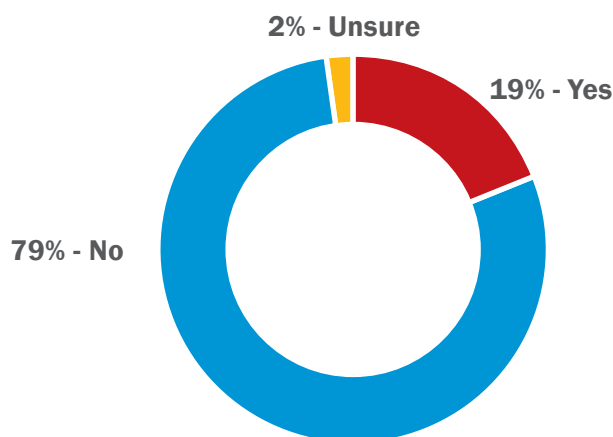




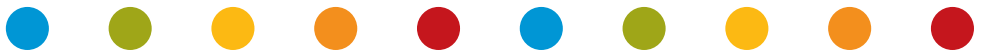
The impacts of food insecurity extend deeply into families with children. Nearly one in five parents reported cutting or skipping their children's meals due to cost with higher rates among Hispanic households, lower-income households, renters, and residents of Districts 3, 7, and 11 (Figure 6). Districts 2 and 11 also reported the highest share of households with children, signaling areas where economic strain and child food insecurity intersect.



Figure.6 In the past twelve months, did you cut the size of your child/children's meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?



While affordability is the dominant driver of food insecurity, residents also face compounding challenges related to physical access, transportation, safety, and the cultural relevance of available food. Nearly half of respondents reported they lacked the space or resources to grow their own food, and 30% said nearby stores do not sell healthy or fresh foods. One in five reported difficulty or safety concerns when walking or traveling to places that sell food, and 17% said stores do not carry foods that meet their family's cultural or dietary needs (Figure 4). These barriers disproportionately affect renters, lower-income households, and residents in specific City Council districts, particularly Districts 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11, reinforcing geographic inequities layered on top of economic instability.

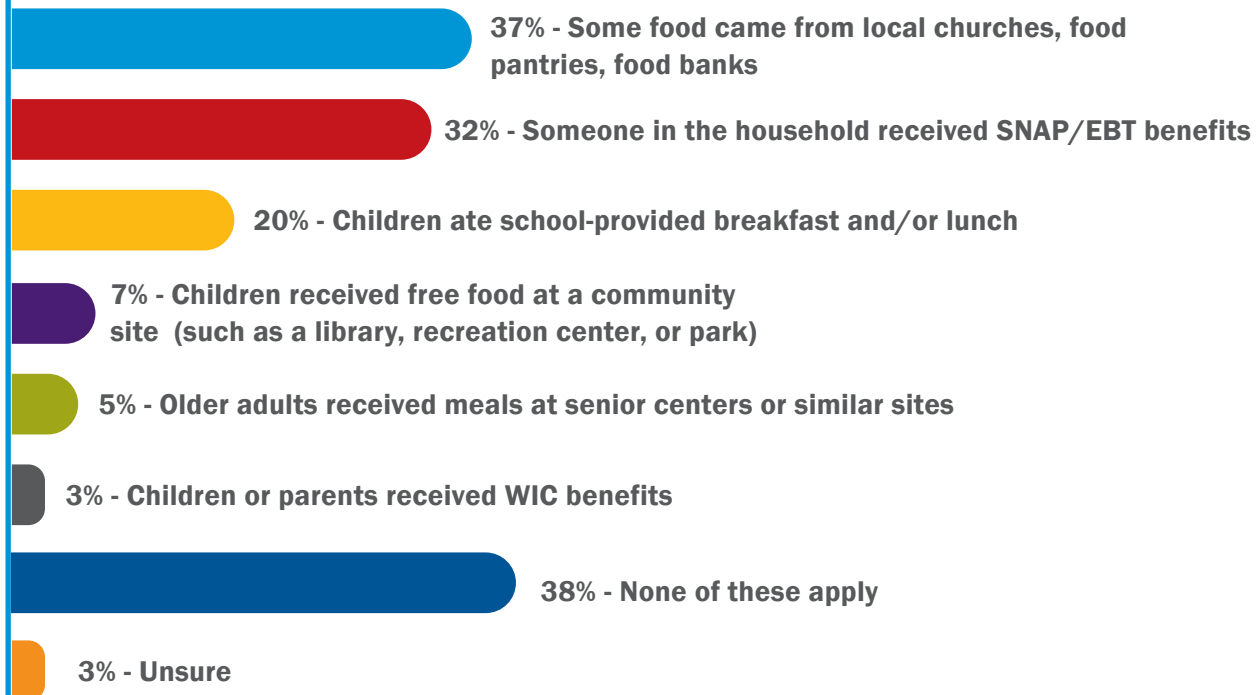


This distinction between food insecurity and food access matters because solutions focused solely on increasing food retail or food supply, while important in some neighborhoods will not resolve food insecurity on their own. A household can live near a grocery store and still be food insecure if the food inside is priced beyond their economic means or does not meet their cultural or health needs. Addressing food insecurity therefore requires strategies that center affordability, income stability, and economic resilience alongside targeted investments in neighborhoods that lack safe and reliable access to healthy food.

Food assistance programs play a critical role in helping residents meet their needs, yet the 2025 data shows that significant gaps remain. Nearly one in six respondents reported receiving food from churches, food pantries, or food banks in the three months prior to the survey, and roughly 14% reported receiving SNAP/EBT benefits (Figure 6). Reliance on these programs was highest among households earning less than \$35,000 and prevalent across nearly all City Council districts. Despite this reliance, assistance often falls short: only 19% of pantry users reported receiving enough food, and even fewer said the food met their cultural, dietary, or household needs (Figure 7). These findings point to the need not only for expanded food assistance, but for approaches that prioritize dignity, choice, accessibility, and cultural relevance.



Figure.7 In the past three months, which of the following applied to your household. Please select all that apply: (Answers will add up to more than 100%)





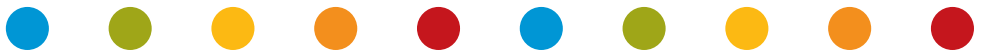
At the same time, there is exceptionally strong public support for policy action to address these challenges. In the 2024 Denver Food Insecurity Survey, more than 89% of respondents strongly agreed that ensuring everyone in Denver can access enough healthy food should be a major priority for elected officials and civic leaders. Building on that momentum, the 2025 survey found that 85% of respondents support the creation of a flexible local fund dedicated to improving food access and food security, with 71% expressing strong support (Figure 8). This was supported among every demographic group, income level, and City Council district, signaling broad alignment across the city.



Figure.8 Some cities have established flexible local funds to improve food access and food security. These funds are often used to support food pantries, community gardens, and programs that make healthy food more available in neighborhoods with limited grocery store options. If Denver voters were presented with a local ballot measure to create a flexible fund dedicated to improving food access and food security, would you support or oppose it?



Together these findings make clear that food insecurity in Denver is not a failure of food supply, as was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather a reflection of rising costs, economic precarity, and uneven access shaped by place. They point to both the urgency and the opportunity for intentional and equity-driven strategies that address affordability, strengthen economic stability, and ensure all Denver residents can access food with dignity and choice.



How to Use This Report

This report is intended to serve as a shared resource for City and County of Denver civic leaders, city agencies, community-based organizations, and food access partners working to reduce food insecurity in Denver. The findings are designed to inform decision-making, prioritize investments, and support coordinated strategies that respond to residents' lived experiences and the evolving economic conditions shaping food access today. Readers can use this report in several key ways:

To understand current conditions:

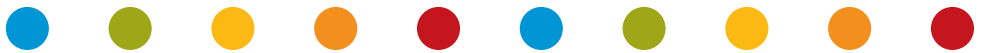
The data provides a snapshot of how food insecurity is experienced across Denver, including the prevalence of meal skipping, the financial trade-offs households are making to afford food, and the barriers residents face related to affordability, transportation, safety, and food suitability. These findings help establish a common baseline for understanding the scope and severity of food insecurity citywide.

To identify disparities and target solutions:

By disaggregating results by income, housing status, race and ethnicity, household composition, and City Council district, the report highlights where food insecurity is most acute and where inequities persist. This information can be used to guide geographically targeted interventions, tailor program design, and ensure resources are directed toward communities experiencing the greatest need, particularly in districts where multiple barriers overlap.

To inform policy, planning, and investment decisions:

The findings underscore that food insecurity in Denver is driven largely by affordability and economic instability rather than food availability alone. Policymakers and city agencies can use this evidence to shape strategies that center food affordability, income stability, transportation access, and community food assistance programs, while also addressing gaps in physical access where they exist.



To establish accountability and future evaluation:

The 2025 survey establishes a benchmark against which future progress can be measured. As new policies, funding mechanisms, or programs are implemented, this report can be used to track changes over time and assess whether interventions are reducing disparities and improving outcomes for Denver residents.

Taken together, this report is meant to be a tool and not just a reference document. It invites decision-makers and partners across the city to use data and community voice to move from understanding food insecurity to taking coordinated and equitable action to address it.

Data Limitations

The 2025 Food Insecurity Survey was administered via text message using contact information derived from a voter data registry. While this methodology allowed for efficient distribution and broad outreach, it may have resulted in the underrepresentation of certain populations. Individuals who are not registered to vote including non-citizens and eligible residents who are not civically engaged may not have been captured through this approach. These groups often face higher rates of economic instability and food insecurity.

Additionally, the reliance on text-based outreach may have excluded residents without consistent access to mobile phones or text messaging services, such as individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability, those who rely on prepaid or shared phones, and some older adults who are less likely to engage with text-based surveys. Individuals experiencing acute economic or food-related stress may also have been less likely to participate due to competing priorities and limited time or capacity to complete a self-administered survey.

The text-message format may also have posed barriers for individuals with disabilities, including those with visual or cognitive impairments, as well as for residents with limited literacy or limited English proficiency who may be more comfortable responding to questions verbally. Some residents may have been hesitant to engage with a survey link sent from an unfamiliar number due to concerns about privacy, scams, or data security, which can disproportionately affect immigrant communities and individuals with lower levels of trust in digital outreach.



While the 2025 survey provides valuable insight into food insecurity across the City and County of Denver, the findings may understate the prevalence and severity of food insecurity among the most vulnerable households. These limitations underscore the importance of continued investment in complementary data collection methods and community-based outreach to ensure future surveys fully capture the experiences of residents facing the greatest barriers to food access.

The next phase of this project will focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the nuances in how Denver residents experience food insecurity, particularly the economic trade-offs and coping strategies households use to manage limited resources. This work will involve targeted outreach to populations and communities that were underrepresented in the 2025 survey, including unhoused individuals, immigrant and refugee communities, older adults, and other groups facing unique barriers to food access. By engaging directly with these communities, the City and County of Denver hopes to capture a more nuanced picture of food insecurity, identify gaps in current supports, and inform strategies that are responsive and reflective of the diverse experiences of all Denver residents.

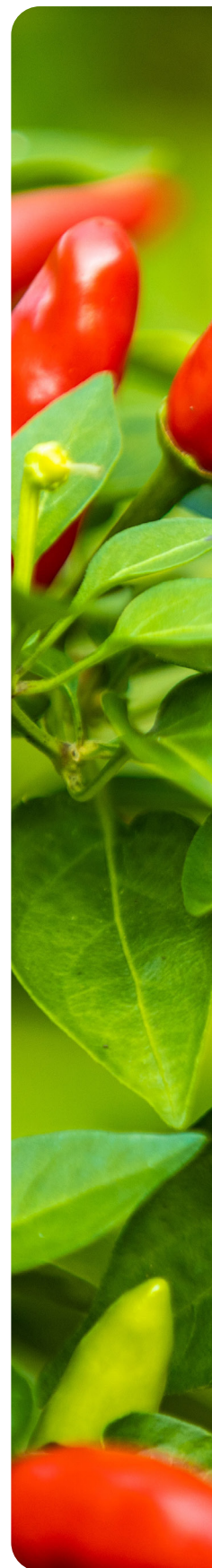


Opportunities for Targeted Approaches to Addressing Food Insecurity in Denver

The findings from the 2025 Food Insecurity Survey highlight both the need and importance for targeted, community-informed approaches to addressing food insecurity in Denver. Food insecurity is not experienced uniformly across the city, and effective responses must account for differences in income, housing stability, neighborhood composition, mobility, and access to culturally relevant food. Targeted strategies that reduce both economic and logistical barriers can help ensure that resources reach residents most impacted by rising food costs and economic instability.

One key opportunity lies in maximizing the impact of federal nutrition programs, particularly the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP has been an effective tool for reducing food insecurity and lifting households out of poverty. Benefits are responsive to income changes, allow residents to make their own food choices with dignity, and put federal dollars directly into the local economy. Innovative community-based solutions further enhance the effectiveness of SNAP by stretching food dollars and reducing access barriers. In Denver, SNAP benefits support not only households, but also grocery stores, farmers markets, and local food producers, creating a multiplier effect that strengthens the broader food system.

In addition to SNAP, strengthening community resilience is critical to addressing both acute and chronic food insecurity. SNAP alone is sometimes insufficient, and many Denver residents are not eligible for federal benefits, highlighting the need for alternative ways to ensure people can access food. Investments and strategies that localize food systems such as community food hubs, urban farms and gardens, support for small retail in neighborhoods lacking grocery stores, and neighborhood food pantries help neighborhoods respond to economic shocks, public health emergencies, and disruptions to federal programs.

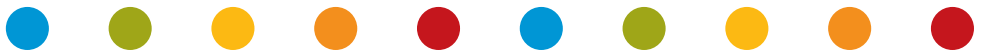




Additionally, transportation remains a significant barrier for many Denver residents, particularly seniors, people with disabilities, and households without reliable transportation. Targeted transportation supports, such as expanding the Denver connector service areas across the city to reach food retailers, transit subsidies, and coordinated market trips through senior centers or affordable housing providers can significantly improve access to healthy food while reducing isolation. Integrating food access considerations into broader transportation and urban/land use planning also presents an opportunity to address structural barriers over the long term. These approaches not only increase food access, but also foster social connection and community belonging, an important but often overlooked component of food security.

This report highlights both the current state of food insecurity and opportunities underway to address it. Across Denver, DDPHE and its many partners are advancing impactful solutions, yet there remains a significant opportunity to scale this work through greater investment. DDPHE has advanced this work through Healthy Food for Denver's Kids (HFDK) and other grant programs, yet the scale of need continues to outpace available resources. As ARPA emergency funds end in Fall 2026 and federal, state, and local budget shortfalls deepen, the importance of reliable local funding becomes even clearer. Analysis by JSI Research Institute shows that between 2020 and 2023, only 31.4% (\$40.7 million) of the \$129.7 million requested for food-related projects was funded, leaving nearly \$89 million in community-identified needs unmet.⁶ This gap represents a powerful opportunity to make a larger, more strategic investment through flexible, multi-year funding, and general operating support that can strengthen Denver's food system and address both immediate and long-term food insecurity.

6 JSI. (2025). Denver Food Vision: Funding Gaps Evaluation Reports.



Together, these targeted and innovative approaches underscore the importance of a coordinated food access strategy that strengthens federal nutritional benefit programs, supports community-driven solutions, and addresses the structural conditions that shape food security in Denver. By aligning policy, funding, and community partnerships, Denver can strengthen its food system while advancing economic stability and dignity for residents most impacted by food insecurity.

Food Systems Work at DDPHE

The Food Systems Team at the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DDPHE) takes a comprehensive, systems-based approach to addressing food insecurity in Denver. Rather than focusing on any single program or intervention, the team examines how the full food system, from production and distribution to access and food waste, shapes residents' ability to obtain food and where structural gaps persist.

DDPHE's food systems work is guided by the 2030 Denver Food Vision, a mayor-adopted plan that provides a roadmap for building an inclusive, healthy, and resilient food system for all Denver residents. Progress toward the vision is tracked through the Denver Food Vision Progress Report and Dashboard, with long-term goals that include reducing inequities, strengthening local food systems, lowering Denver's food insecurity rate, and increasing access to healthy, culturally relevant foods.⁷

To advance these goals, the Food Systems Team leads and supports a range of initiatives grounded in data collection, community engagement, technical assistance, and evaluation. A core component of this work is measuring food insecurity. In 2024, DDPHE conducted Denver's first citywide food insecurity survey, establishing a local baseline that now informs City programs and policy decisions/

⁷ City and County of Denver. (n.d.). Denver Food Vision Progress Report. <https://denvergov.org/Community/Support/Food/Vision/Denver-Food-Vision-Progress-Report>



DDPHE also supports food access and community food providers through grant-making, technical assistance, and partner convening. The team convenes the Denver Metro Community Food Resources group to learn directly from food access providers about challenges and barriers and to collaboratively identify solutions, including expanding access to culturally affirming foods, supporting local purchasing, and reducing food waste.

Recognizing that food insecurity extends beyond city boundaries, DDPHE co-leads Food in Communities, a regional collaborative with neighboring jurisdictions and community partners focused on advancing equitable food access through policy change, land access for food production, and data-driven funding strategies.

Additional efforts include reducing food waste through the Food Matters program, which redirects surplus food to households and provides residents and businesses with guidance on making food last longer while reducing environmental impacts. Through Healthy Food for Denver's Kids (HFDK), the City and County of Denver supports youth food access and nutrition education through direct grant funding to community organizations. DDPHE also advances sustainable and equitable food purchasing through the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP) and shapes food policy through the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council (SFPC). In addition, DDPHE convenes the citywide Food Interagency Group (FIG) to strengthen coordination, alignment, and collaboration across City departments.

Together, these efforts reflect DDPHE's role as a convener, coordinator, and systems partner, working alongside communities and City agencies to address food insecurity not as a single issue, but as a complex and interconnected challenge that requires sustained, cross-sector solutions.



Conclusion

Food insecurity in Denver is a complex challenge, shaped by affordability, economic instability, and persistent inequities across neighborhoods and communities. Addressing it will require sustained, coordinated efforts across the city; there are no quick fixes, and solutions must be intentional, equitable, and responsive to the lived experiences of residents. At the same time, the findings in this report highlight both the urgency and the opportunity: by grounding policy, programs, and investments in local data and community voices, Denver can make meaningful progress toward ensuring that all residents can access one of the most basic human rights—enough healthy and affordable food to eat. This is a long-term endeavor, but one that is deeply worthwhile and worthy of continued city-wide commitment and collective action.



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