

Emergency Food Assistance in Pennsylvania: About the Series

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What is the issue?

Food insecurity remains an intractable issue across the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as a household-level condition where household members have limited or uncertain access to adequate food. This includes both lack of affordable and appropriate foods to eat as well as reduced quality, variety, or desirability of food available. In 2022 in Pennsylvania, an estimated 12 percent of the population (including one in six children) experienced food insecurity. Many experts suggest that rates have risen since then.

One way that governments and communities work to reduce food insecurity is through emergency food assistance. The emergency food network consists of a complex web of food banks and local partner agencies, like food pantries and soup kitchens. Food banks acquire food and funding from federal and state governments, corporate food surplus or donations, and community donations. Food banks distribute food to local partner agencies, who in turn distribute food to residents in need.

Within our current global food system characterized by both surplus (of production) and deprivation (of access), the emergency food system plays a large role in reducing food insecurity. Yet, while many food banks seek to address the “root causes” of hunger, and despite hundreds of millions of dollars of federal and state food assistance to the food banking system, food insecurity rates remain high. In short, many residents remain unserved or underserved. This study identifies many of the instrumental challenges and barriers to emergency food distribution in Pennsylvania, with a key goal of making policy and program recommendations to close these gaps.

About the study

We conducted this study in 2023 with financial support from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. To understand diverse viewpoints from different levels of the emergency food system, we interviewed food banks, partner agencies (e.g., pantries), and residents who receive food. All interviews were transcribed. Key themes from interviews were identified through a thematic analysis of transcripts.

- **Food bank survey and interviews:** We first conducted a survey and in-depth interview with a statewide sample of 22 food banks. The survey and interview focused on food banks’ operations and the processes by which they obtain food and distribute it to partner agencies.
- **Partner agency interviews and site visits:** We then selected four food banks to serve as case studies, representing different scopes and scales of operation (i.e., serving a single county versus serving many counties) and different geographies (i.e., serving a mix of urban and rural counties). For each of these four food banks, we conducted in-depth interviews and site visits with a sample of partner agencies. Interviews focused on how agencies obtain food from food

banks and how they distribute food to residents. Site visits allowed us to directly observe these food distribution procedures. We conducted a total of 35 interviews and 8 visits across the case studies.

- **Food recipient interviews:** Finally, while conducting site visits, we recruited food recipients to participate in in-depth interviews as well. Interviews focused on their experiences receiving emergency food assistance and remaining unmet needs.

Key findings

Positive benefits to food recipients:

Overwhelmingly, food recipients emphasized how important the emergency food system is for their well-being. Recipients told us that visiting food distributions was a crucial way they reduced experiences of food insecurity and hunger. Pantries especially help recipients access nutrient-dense items like produce and meats, which can be particularly hard to afford.

Challenges meeting need: Nonetheless, food banks and pantries underscored the challenges they face in addressing food insecurity within their communities. Staff members described lacking funding to purchase sufficient food and the need for fresher, more nutritious foods. Food banks and pantries struggle with acquiring adequate space and refrigeration, securing funds for staff salaries, and recruiting a consistent volunteer base.

Barriers to access: Food recipients also outlined barriers they face in accessing emergency food. Emergency food may only be available at certain times and locations that do not match their schedules. Recipients in some

communities may not be able to attend enough food distributions to meet their household food needs. Lack of transportation to distributions and fear of facing stigma at food distributions also limits access.

Remaining unmet need: Because of these challenges and barriers, recipients remain underserved by the emergency food system. 52 percent of our participants reported experiences of food insecurity, despite receiving some emergency food assistance. Food banks and pantries also reported that thousands more in their communities remain entirely unserved. Unserved populations of note include rural residents, older adults, veterans, children, immigrant families, and the unhoused.

Innovations and successes: Food banks work to overcome these challenges and barriers through innovative approaches to distribution (Brief #7), through stigma reduction work (Briefs #9 and 19), through working for better policy tools, amidst other efforts. Such work is making headway, but unmet needs remain.

“You have to call the utilities and ask them if they'd be okay with waiting on a payment until next month, because you have to decide whether to buy medication and food over paying a utility bill... We don't have to do that now with having the food pantry available to us... It's such a relief and such a stress reliever.” (Food recipient, Greene County)

Overview of the series

In this series of policy briefs, we present some of the main findings from the study. Each brief presents findings on a specific topic. We also connect these findings to concrete policy and program recommendations to bolster resident access to food and reduce food insecurity in Pennsylvania.

This study was approved in 2023 by the Penn State University Institutional Review Board.

References

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