

ST. MARY'S COUNTY, MARYLAND
NOVEMBER 2022

FOOD SECURITY REPORT

PREPARED BY:
THE HEALTHY ST. MARY'S PARTNERSHIP



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Introduction

Our health and well-being are products of not only the health care we receive and the choices we make, but also the places where we live, learn, work, and play. As the local health improvement coalition, the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership (HSMP) works to identify and address the health needs of the community as a whole. Because working together has a greater impact on health and economic vitality than working alone, HSMP brings together individual community members and organizational partners to improve health in St. Mary's County, Maryland.

In 2022, the Healthy St. Mary's Partnership launched a comprehensive assessment using quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically collect and analyze data to better understand food security within our community. Food security is having consistent and equitable access to enough food for an active, healthy life. The results of this assessment are compiled in this report and the data will inform community decision-making and actions to address food security locally.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used for this assessment. The assessment included a review of quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of state and local sources related to food security, food access, and community support services. Combined, these data sources aimed to provide insight into food security in St. Mary's County and opportunities for addressing food insecurity.

Secondary Data

Existing data related to population-level health and food security was reviewed to identify and understand food security in St. Mary's County. In addition, data on social and economic factors such as housing, employment, and educational opportunities—the “social determinants of health”— were reviewed to provide context and help identify how these broader social and economic issues affect the prevalence of food insecurity in St. Mary's.

Data sources include the U.S. Census, United Way ALICE Report, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Conduent Healthy Communities Institute, Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Price Outlook, USDA Food Environment Atlas, Department of Social Services Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Maryland Women, Infants & Children (WIC) Program, National Center for Education Statistics, Maryland State Department of Education School and Community Nutrition Programs, Department of Aging and Human Services Farmers Market Nutrition Program, Department of Aging and Human Services Home Delivered Meals Program, Maryland Food Bank Maryland Hunger Map.

Primary Data

To expand upon the information gathered from secondary data, HSMP conducted a series of town hall meetings, two for local food pantries and one for community stakeholders. Additionally, HSMP incorporated data collected through a community self-report survey. In total, more than 750 community members were engaged between August and October 2022 through these methods.

A brief synopsis of the research components are presented below:

Town Halls

A total of 3 town halls were conducted with individuals from across St. Mary's County. Participants represented a variety of community groups and sectors, including: local food pantries, healthcare workers, educators, county government, public health, and social services.

Community Survey

A total of 737 individuals participated in the community survey. This survey was conducted primarily online; however, paper copies were available throughout the community as well. A Spanish version of the survey was also made available in both online and paper versions.

This survey utilized the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form. This survey module and the associated Six-Item Food Security Scale were developed by researchers at the National Center for Health Statistics in collaboration with Abt Associates Inc. This short form survey utilizes 5 questions from the 18 question U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module. The sum of affirmative responses to the questions in the module is the household's raw score on the scale. Food security status is assigned as follows: a raw score of 0 is considered high food security; raw score of 1 is considered marginal food security; a raw score of 2 - 4 is considered low food security; and raw score of 5 - 6 is considered very low food security. Additionally, the survey asked three demographic questions: zip code, number of adults in the household, and number of children in the household.

Limitations

As with all data collection efforts, there are several limitations related to the assessment's methods that should be acknowledged. There is a time lag for many large data surveillance systems. Additionally, data based on self-reports should be interpreted with particular caution. In some instances, respondents may over or under-report behaviors or conditions based on fear of social stigma or misunderstanding the question being asked. Respondents may also be prone to recall bias—that is, they may attempt to answer accurately but remember incorrectly. Despite these limitations, most of the state or local self-report behavioral surveys benefit from large sample sizes and repeated administrations, enabling comparison over time.

Finally, while the community survey and town hall meetings conducted for this study provide valuable insights, results are not statistically representative of a larger population due to non-random recruiting techniques and small sample size. Therefore findings, while directional and descriptive, should not be interpreted as definitive. The coalition will continue to review new data as it becomes available.

Community Profile

The health of a community is related to several factors, including who lives in the community, and the resources, services, and opportunities available. Healthy People 2030 defines social determinants of health (SDOH) as “the conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.” The following section provides an overview of demographics as well as several social and economic factors of St. Mary's County.

Demographics of St. Mary's County

According to the U.S. Census St. Mary's County had an estimated population of 114,468 in 2021¹. St. Mary's County has seen a 32.8% increase in population since 2000. The rate of growth has slowed slightly since 2010 with an 8.9% increase in population between 2010 and 2021².

23.9% of the St. Mary's County population in 2021 was under the age of 18 and 13.7% were age 65 or older. Half of St. Mary's County residents identify as female (49.8%) or male (50.2%)³. 11.9% of the County's population have a disability. According to Census estimates 73% of St. Mary's County residents identified as White non-Hispanic, 15.2% as Black or African American, 3% as Asian, 0.5% as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 5.7% as Hispanic or Latino. It should be noted that the County's racial and ethnic composition has continued to change with minority populations increasing in St. Mary's County.

The median household income in St. Mary's County is \$95,864, and 8% of the population is below the federal poverty level⁴. ALICE, an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, is the United Way's way of defining and understanding the struggles of households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level, but not enough to afford a bare-bones household budget. According to the 2020 ALICE report, in 2018 31% of households in St. Mary's County were below the ALICE threshold (7% households in poverty and 24% ALICE households)⁵.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, 2021

² U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census, 2000 & 2010, and ACS 1-Year Estimates, 2019

³ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, 2021

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates, 2021

⁵ United for ALICE Research Center, 2018 County Profiles

The unemployment rate in St. Mary's County in June through July 2022 has fluctuated between 3.4% and 4.5%⁶. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a surge of unemployment claims nationwide in 2020. Unemployment creates financial instability and barriers to accessing healthy food.

30.2% of St. Mary's County residents aged 25 and over have a bachelor's degree or higher, which is lower than the percentage of college-educated residents in the State (40.9%)⁷. Nearly one in ten residents have no high school diploma (9.4%)⁸.

Food Security in St. Mary's County

What is Food Security?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as consistent and equitable access to enough food for an active, healthy life. At a minimum, food security includes readily available nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and the ability to acquire those foods in socially acceptable ways (without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

In 2006, the USDA introduced new language to describe ranges of severity of food insecurity. The following labels define ranges of food security:

Food Security

- High food security: no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022

⁷ American Community Survey 5-Year, 2016-2020

⁸ American Community Survey 5-Year, 2016-2020

- Marginal food security: one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.

Food Insecurity

- Low food security: reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- Very low food security: reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

Local Food Security

The 2021 Food Insecurity Index, created by Conduent Healthy Communities Institute, is a measure of food access correlated with economic and household hardship. All zip codes, census tracts, counties, and county equivalents in the United States are given an index value from 0 (low need) to 100 (high need). In St. Mary's County, zip code 20670 - Patuxent River - shows the highest need with an index score of 47.3⁹. The next zip codes with the highest index values are 20653 - Lexington Park(46.5), 20634 - Great Mills (41.1), and 20667 - Park Hall (39.7). All of these zip codes are in the Greater Lexington Park area.

Feeding America conducts Map the Meal Gap annually to provide insight into food insecurity both nationally and at the local level. The Projected Food Insecurity Rate for St. Mary's County in 2021 was 10.8%¹⁰. The Projected Child Food Insecurity Rate in 2021 was 14.9%. Both of these are increased from the 2020 rate which were both

⁹ Conduent Healthy Communities Institute, 2021

¹⁰ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap, 2021

9.6%¹¹. In 2020, the food insecure population in St. Mary's County was 10,830. One townhall participant described food insecurity in St. Mary's County, stating, "Some people need help only at the end of the month, some just need help budgeting, and others are never positive where their next meal is coming from."

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines cost-burdened families as those who pay more than 30% of their income for housing and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food. In 2019, 39.5% of renters in St. Mary's County were cost-burdened, compared to 18.8% of residents who own their homes¹². Severe housing cost burden is defined as the percentage of households that spend 50% or more of their household income on housing. For 2016-2020, 12% of St. Mary's County households, approximately 4,813, were considered to have a severe housing cost burden¹³.

The all-items Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of economy-wide inflation in September 2022 was up 8.2 percent from September 2021¹⁴. The CPI for all food increased 0.7 percent from August 2022 to September 2022, and food prices were 11.2 percent higher than in September 2021. In 2022, food price increases are expected to be above the increases in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, all food prices are predicted to increase between 9.5 and 10.5 percent. During the town halls, several food pantries noted that they have seen an increase in numbers since the price of food has gone up. In the 2022 St. Mary's County Food Security Survey, 33.3% of respondents had a raw score indicating that their household had low or very low food security (Figure 1).

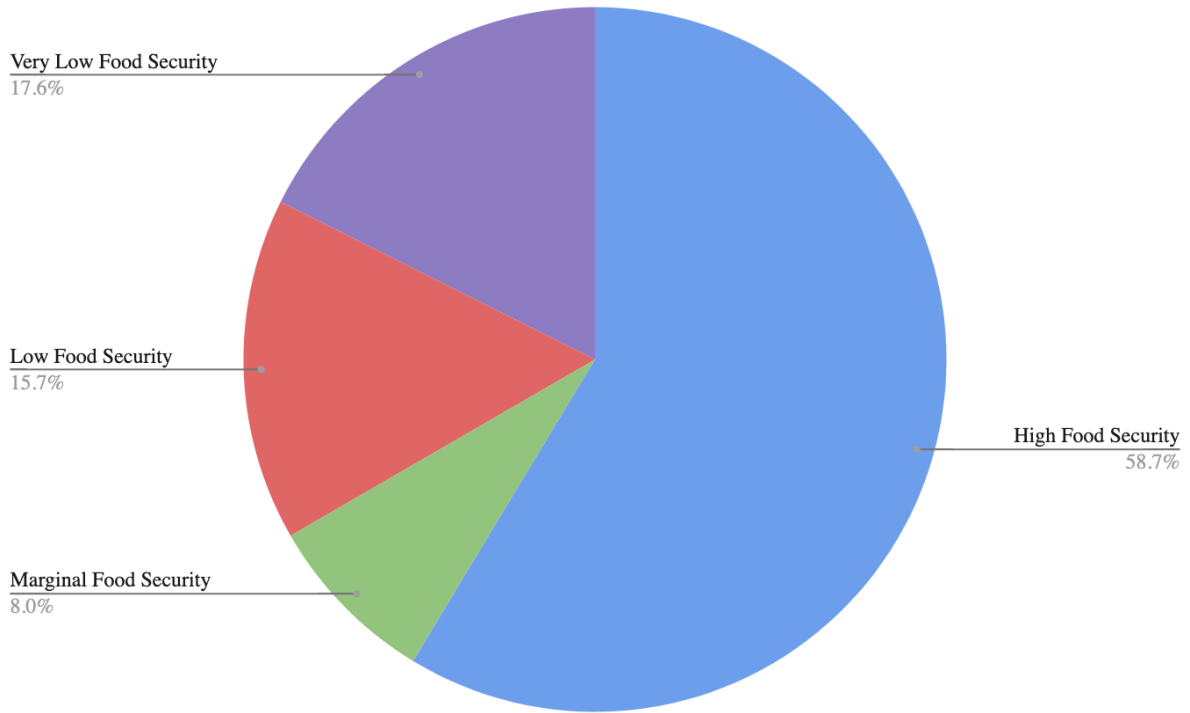
¹¹ Feeding America, Map the Meal Gap, 2020

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 1-Year Estimates, 2019

¹³ American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, 2016-2020

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Price Outlook, 2022 and 2023

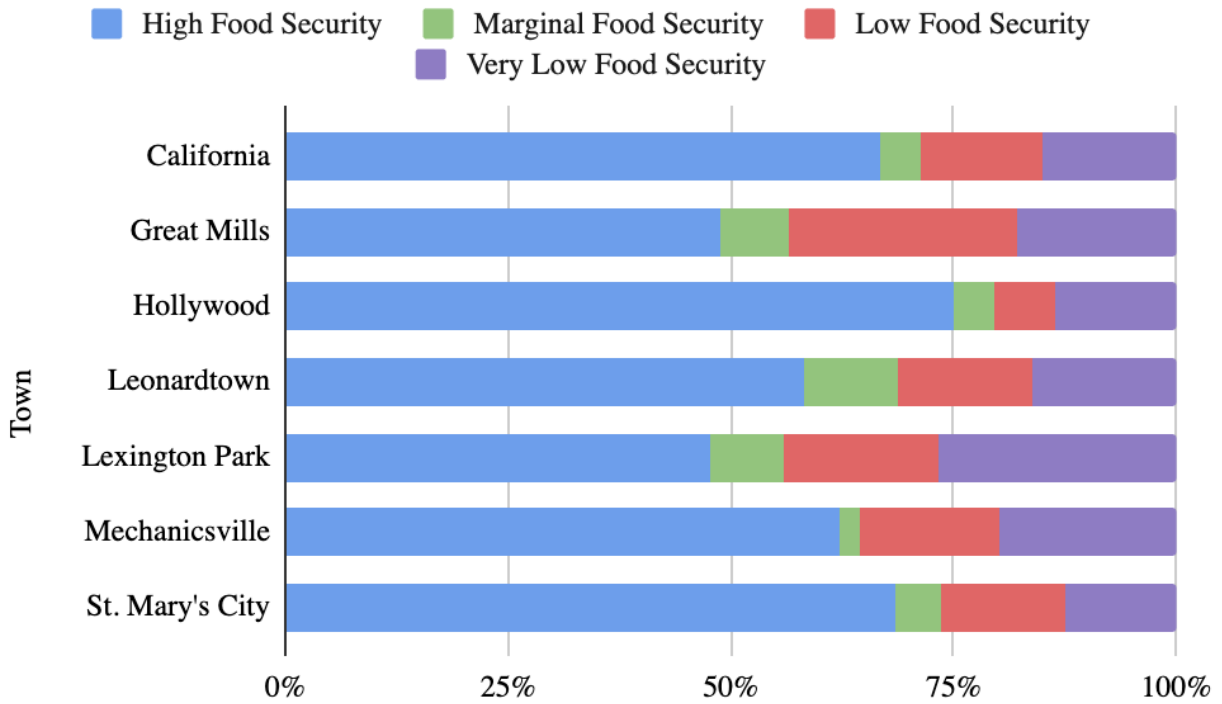
Figure 1: Household Food Security Status



Source: St. Mary's County Food Security Community Survey, 2022

When looking at the towns in St. Mary's County with more than 35 responses to the 2022 Food Security Community Survey, Lexington Park (43.9%) and Great Mills (45.9%) had the highest percentage of respondents who had a raw score indicating that their household had low or very low food security (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Food Insecurity Level By Town

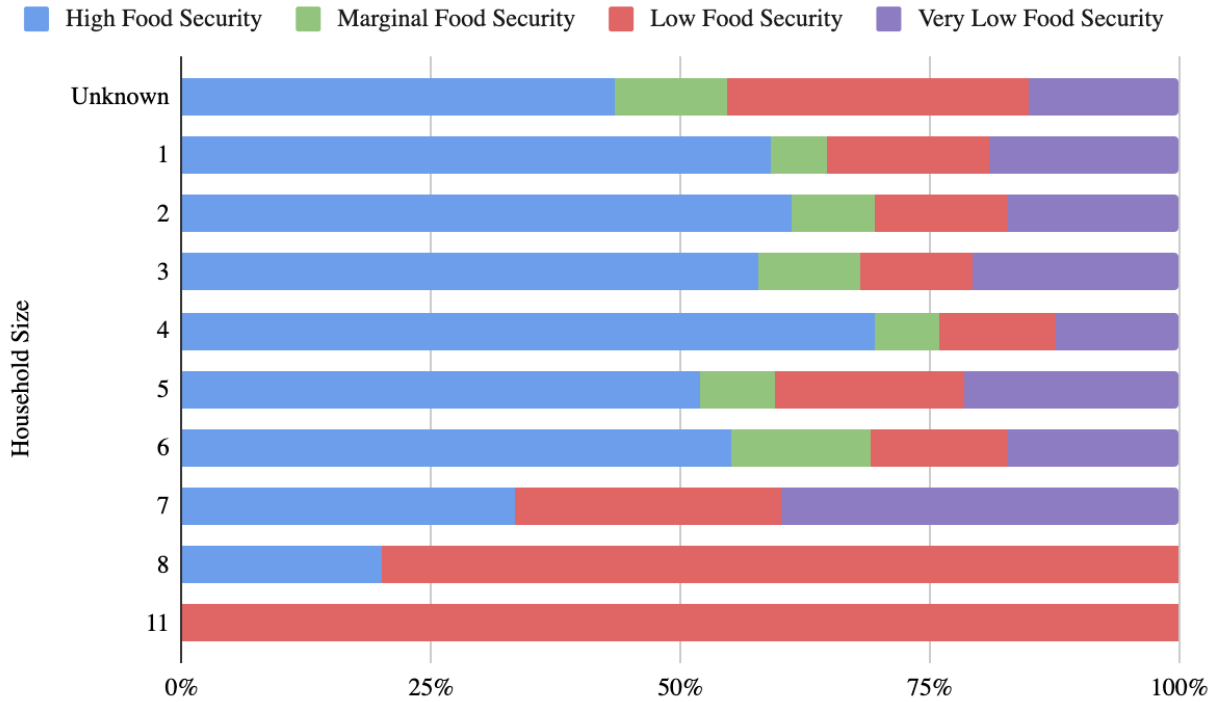


Town	High Food Security	Marginal Food Security	Low Food Security	Very Low Food Security
California	44	3	9	10
Great Mills	19	1	10	7
Hollywood	33	2	2	9
Leonardtown	50	9	5	14
Lexington Park	75	13	27	42
Mechanicsville	28	4	6	10
St. Mary's City	93	7	19	17

Source: St. Mary's County Food Security Community Survey, 2022

As shown in Figure 3, household sizes showed a varied raw score indicating that their household had low or very low food security. Figure 4 shows that households that have at least 1 child had higher percentages of raw score indicating that their household had low or very low food security.

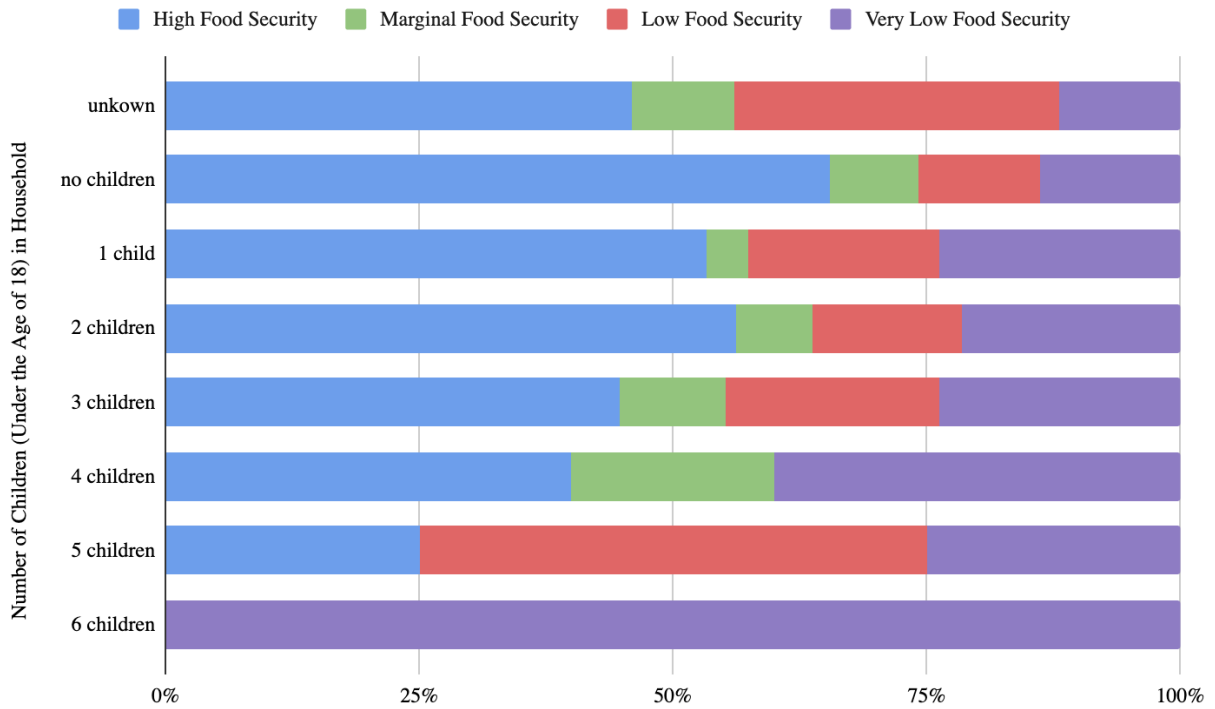
Figure 3: Food Insecurity Level By Household Size



Household Size	High Food Security	Marginal Food Security	Low Food Security	Very Low Food Security
Unknown	23	6	16	8
1	62	6	17	20
2	110	15	24	31
3	67	12	13	24
4	107	10	18	19
5	41	6	15	17
6	16	4	4	5
7	5	0	4	6
8	1	0	4	0
11	0	0	1	0

Source: St. Mary's County Food Security Community Survey, 2022

Figure 4: Food Insecurity Level By Number of Children Under the Age of 18 in the Household



Number of Children (Under the Age of 18) in Household	High Food Security	Marginal Food Security	Low Food Security	Very Low Food Security
Unknown	23	5	16	6
no children	246	33	45	52
1 child	65	5	23	29
2 children	76	10	20	29
3 children	17	4	8	9
4 children	4	2	0	4
5 children	1	0	2	1
6 children	0	0	0	1

Source: St. Mary's County Food Security Community Survey, 2022

When discussing the reasoning behind local food insecurity, town hall participants cited low wages, unemployment, and increased cost of food, housing, and utilities as potential factors.

Community Supports

For July - August 2022, the St. Mary's County Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program reported 1,576 participants¹⁵. 27.2% of participants were infants (under the age of 1), 48.4% were children ages 1 - 4, and 24.4% were women. In May 2022, St. Mary's County reported 7,052 SNAP Cases year to date¹⁶. In St. Mary's County, 0.5 stores per 1,000 population in St. Mary's County accept SNAP benefits¹⁷. One town hall participant noted that "food stamps aren't enough for a month of groceries for a family."

In St. Mary's County, there are five identified school-wide Title I programs - George Washington Carver Elementary School, Green Holly Elementary School, Greenview Knolls Elementary School, Lexington Park Elementary School, and Park Hall Elementary School. For the 2019 - 2020 school year, 34% of St. Mary's County Public School students were eligible for the Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program¹⁸. During that School Year, 31.91% of students enrolled in the program¹⁹. As of November 2022, 39.44% of students enrolled in the program for the 2022 - 2023 school year²⁰.

The Department of Aging and Human Services offers two programs that address food insecurity in St. Mary's County. The Farmers Market Nutrition Program gives recipients 60 years of age and older, who are residents of St. Mary's County and who are at or below the established federal poverty limit, a booklet of checks to use at recognized farmers markets. In 2021, 72 residents enrolled in this program²¹. The Home Delivered Meals Program is available for seniors age 60 or older and homebound. The program

¹⁵ Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, 2022

¹⁶ St. Mary's County Department of Social Services, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 2022

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, 2017

¹⁸ National Center for Education Statistics, 2019-2020

¹⁹ Maryland State Department of Education, School and Community Nutrition Programs, 2019-2020

²⁰ St. Mary's County Public Schools, Food and Nutrition Services, 2022

²¹ St. Mary's County Department of Aging and Human Services, Farmers Market Nutrition Program, 2021

brings meals to those who are unable to leave their homes without assistance. In March 2022, 160 residents were enrolled in this program²².

There are more than 20 food pantries throughout St. Mary's County. Food pantries in St. Mary's County offer several programs and options for food distribution including regular pantry hours, Saturday distribution events, hot food trucks during the summer, emergency food crisis programs, partnerships with schools, fresh produce boxes, and mobile food delivery. St. Mary's Caring is the only soup kitchen in St. Mary's County and they reported serving more than 120,000 free meals in 2021. The food pantries and soup kitchen in St. Mary's County get a majority of their food for distribution through local donations, the Maryland Food Bank/Feed St. Mary's, and excess food donations from local grocery stores and restaurants. In 2021, the Maryland Food Bank reported more than 800,000 lbs of food distributed in St. Mary's County²³. During the town halls, several participants noted that they have seen an increase in use of local food pantries and food distribution efforts over the past year. One town hall participant noted that they "feed approximately 150-160 families per week. This has probably tripled since the pandemic, but that didn't cause it - it's everything else, the cost of gas, electric, food...". Alternatively, some pantries note an increase in participants during certain times of the year based on additional bills. One town hall participant stated, "[Our pantry] sees higher numbers in the winter because of the cost of oil." Several pantries in the county have programs where they provide help with electric bills, rent, and gas cards. During the town halls, several participants indicated that pride, stigma, accessibility and awareness of the pantries, and for undocumented community members fear of

²² St. Mary's County Department of Aging and Human Services, Home Delivered Meals Program, 2022

²³ Maryland Food Bank, Maryland Hunger Map, 2021

providing their information prevent community members from utilizing community supports such as food pantries, SNAP, and WIC.

Food Environment

The food environment index combines two measures of food access: the percentage of the population that is low-income and has low access to a grocery store, and the percentage of the population that did not have access to a reliable source of food during the past year (food insecurity). The index ranges from 0 (worst) to 10 (best) and equally weights the two measures. The food environment index for St. Mary's County is 8.3, which is lower than the Maryland state value (8.7)²⁴. Over time the St. Mary's County value has been decreasing significantly with the value decreasing from 8.9 in 2019.

The density of fast-food restaurants, farmers' markets, and grocery stores in a community may be an indicator of healthy food access. Fast food is often high in fat and calories and lacking in recommended nutrients. Fast food outlets are more common in low-income neighborhoods and studies suggest that they strongly contribute to the high incidence of obesity and obesity-related health problems in these communities. St. Mary's County has 0.68 fast food restaurants per 1,000 population which is similar to the density of fast food restaurants in neighboring Calvert (0.65) and Charles (0.77) Counties²⁵. Farmers' markets provide a way for community members to buy fresh and affordable agricultural products while supporting local farmers. In St. Mary's County there are approximately 0.04 farmers' markets per 1,000 population, similar to the density in neighboring counties, 0.02 in Charles County and 0.04 in Calvert County²⁶.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, 2022

²⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, 2016

²⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, 2018

There are strong correlations between the density of grocery stores in a neighborhood and the nutrition and diet of its residents. St. Mary's County has 0.15 grocery stores per 1,000 population which is similar to the density in Charles (0.13) and Calvert (0.15) Counties²⁷. It is important to note that in 2022 three of the four McKay's grocery stores in St. Mary's County closed their doors, further lowering that ratio. Additionally, 3.7% of St. Mary's County residents are considered low income and have low access to a grocery store (living more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store if in an urban area, and more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store if in a rural area)²⁸. 5.2% of St. Mary's County children are considered to have low access to a grocery store.

Strategies to Address Food Security in St. Mary's County

Below are suggested strategies that coalition members, partner organizations, and individual community members may implement to increase food security in St. Mary's County.

- Establish an online platform to serve as a message board for communication between food pantries and soup kitchens in St. Mary's County and highlight pantry profiles for community members.
- Support access to food pantries through evening and weekend pantry hours and establishment of a mobile food pantry.

²⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, 2016

²⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Environment Atlas, 2015

- Increase awareness of local supports including food pantries and federal benefits programs such as SNAP and WIC.
- Advocate for increased funding for Maryland Market Money program.
- Increase the number of farmers markets and farm stands enrolled in the Maryland Market Money program.
- Expand the Farmers Feeding St. Mary's program to include additional distribution events and advocate for annual funding.
- Support local development plans and sponsorship programs for community gardens.
- Support education around fruit and vegetable gardening.
- Conduct fundraising events to support food distribution in St. Mary's County.
- Support education around food security.
- Develop a campaign to decrease stigma and fear around the use of local supports including food pantries, and federal benefits programs such as SNAP and WIC.
- Support outreach to undocumented community members and their children around local supports and federal nutrition assistance programs that are available.
- Increase agroforestry (trees & shrubs that provide fruit, nuts, berries for foraging) at schools, parks and publicly owned areas.
- Establish a take-home meal program for students.
- Increase partnership between schools and food pantries.

- Establish a Food Prescription program where doctors prescribe a certain dollar amount of fruits and vegetables to their low-income patients with chronic diseases.
- Establish emergency food box program at public sites that are available 24/7.
- Increase the number of school gardens and tower gardens.
- Support outreach to the military and veteran communities around local supports including food pantries, and federal benefits programs such as SNAP and WIC.
- Increase educate for children, teens, and adults on basic cooking and meal planning.

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