

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).

Local Food Security

Feeding America conducts Map the Meal Gap annually to provide insight into food insecurity both nationally and at the local level. The Food Insecurity Rate for St. Mary's County in 2023 was 12.5%. The Child Food Insecurity Rate in 2023 was 13.1%. Both of these rates increased from the 2021 and 2022 rates. It is projected that 50% of food insecure children live in households that are likely not income-eligible for federal nutrition assistance.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 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 2021, 54.3% of renters in St. Mary's County were cost-burdened, compared to 26.1% of residents who own their homes¹.

Severe housing cost burden is defined as the percentage of households that spend 50% or more of their household income on housing. For 2019-2023, 10.7% of St. Mary's

¹ National Center for Smart Growth Analysis of HUD's Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy data, 2021

County households were considered to have a severe housing cost burden. Households in the Charlotte Hall (15.2%) and Lexington Park (16.1%) census-designated places showed an increased rate of severe housing cost burden².

The all-items Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of economy-wide inflation, in June 2025 had increased 0.3 percent from May 2025 and was up 2.7 percent from June 2024³. The CPI for all food increased 0.3 percent from May 2025 to June 2025. Food prices in June 2025 were 3.0 percent higher than in June 2024. In 2025 and 2026, food prices are expected to increase 2.9% and 2.7%, respectively. These are historically average rates of growth for food prices.

Community Supports

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 2023 - 2024 school year, 33.8% of St. Mary's County Public School students were eligible for the Free or Reduced Price Lunch Program⁴. During that School Year, 40.71% of students enrolled in the program⁵. As of November 2024, 41.09% of students enrolled in the program for the 2024 - 2025 school year⁶.

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,

² American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, 2019 - 2023

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Price Outlook, 2025 and 2026

⁴ National Center for Education Statistics, 2023-2024

⁵ Maryland State Department of Education, School and Community Nutrition Programs, 2023-2024

⁶ Maryland State Department of Education, School and Community Nutrition Programs, 2024-2025

emergency food crisis programs, partnerships with schools, fresh produce boxes, and mobile food delivery. The food pantries and singular 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. Between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024, the Maryland Food Bank reported 682,018 lbs of food distributed in St. Mary's County⁷.

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 8.5, which is lower than the Maryland state value (8.7)⁸. St. Mary's County has seen this value increase steadily since 2022 (8.3).

⁷ Maryland Food Bank, Maryland Hunger Map, 2025

⁸ County Health Rankings, 2025