

# Hunger and Food Insecurity Community Assessment Report

Mower County, Minnesota

April 2023



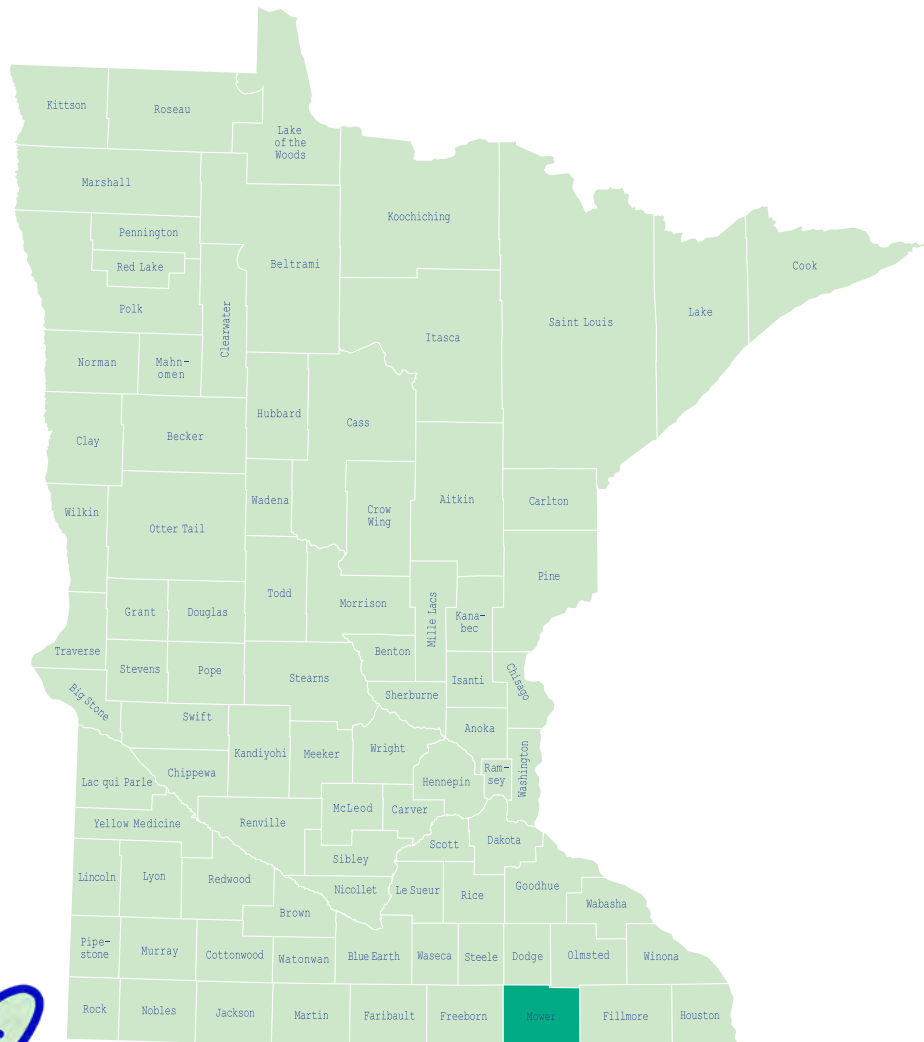
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# HOMETOWN FOOD SECURITY PROJECT

MOWER COUNTY, MN



[HometownFoodSecurity.org](https://HometownFoodSecurity.org)

# Executive Summary

## The Big Picture

We know that no individual, company or organization can end hunger alone. That's why our community has assembled the Hometown Food Security Project, a coalition of local organizations, companies, government agencies, volunteers and hunger-relief partners.

The vision of this coalition is as simple as it is challenging: no one goes hungry in Mower County. We believe a food secure community can be achieved, and that there's no better place to start than in our hometown, and no better time to start than today.

While existing national and state approaches to addressing food security have made progress, they have not solved the issue. In fact, rates of food insecurity in our community haven't dropped much in decades. This report demonstrates that Mower County has the resources, knowledge and community spirit to both reduce near-term food insecurity and create programs and resources that can improve lives in the long term.

Just as each individual in need represents a unique experience, every community has different challenges when it comes to food insecurity. We believe actions within our town and county are needed, and even necessary, to accomplish the mission. It is an approach broad enough to take into account larger national forces and historical trends but focused enough to keep individuals and families in clear view. We intend our work to become a replicable example for how other communities can effectively address this difficult problem.

## Progress to Date

Starting in May 2022, the Hometown Food Security Project has gathered leaders from critical organizations including those from businesses, schools and government as well as local and regional non-profit organizations. The coalition has held dozens of meetings and events, including brainstorming and listening sessions, and collaborated with experts from Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. The shared experience and knowledge gathered from coalition and community members over the last year forms the basis of this report.



## Community Assessment: Identifying Assets and Gaps

The causes of food insecurity are complex and interconnected. They include social and economic forces that are both local and national and have been decades in the making. Understanding these forces from a population level and an individual level is key to creating effective solutions. This report is intended to complete a vital step in the process of achieving food security locally:

A comprehensive community assessment of the assets as well as deep understanding of the populations in need and the social and economic causes of food insecurity. Coalition members hosted community-wide listening sessions, surveyed dozens of stakeholders, and held hundreds of individual conversations to gather information for

this report. Our hope is that this report will be the foundational document that creates a vibrant discussion to guide the next step in the coalition's work: to create a strategic goal and action plan.

### Assessment of Assets

Dozens of organizations, including federal, state, and local programs, were engaged to understand their strengths and to harvest their knowledge of food insecurity in the county. We believe this understanding of the various organizations and resources is the first step toward better communication and coordination.

### The Importance of SNAP

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) remains the most important and effective program addressing food insecurity in Mower County. While expenditures on the program have increased over time (and skyrocketed during Covid), SNAP is not designed to cover all nutritional costs for recipients. In addition, not all people or families who qualify for SNAP benefits currently receive them.

### Diving Into Unique Pockets of Need

Food insecurity has many causes and consequences depending on individual populations. In this report we've examined various groups to understand their unique issues, paying particular attention to populations that may be falling into gaps of available resources, including:

- Seniors and older adults
- Immigrant communities
- People with disabilities
- Schoolchildren
- Veterans

We hope this deeper understanding helps reveal new approaches and new collaborations to finding workable solutions to hunger.



# Overview

## Vital Nature of the Work

The challenge of hunger is both immediate and long term, so we have to hold both those perspectives in our hearts and minds as we address the problem. Tonight, in our community, homebound elderly persons will scour their cupboards, hoping to find a can of food. Parents will struggle to understand the resources available to help them feed their families. Children will be unable to sleep because of pain in their bellies. Tomorrow, those children will go to school and struggle to learn and grow because their bodies and minds are weak from lack of nutrition.

These immediate needs have long-lasting consequences. The physical and emotional stress of ongoing hunger can lead to depression, feelings of hopelessness, drug use and suicide.<sup>1</sup> For children, the lack of nutrition can stunt physical and mental growth and cause cascading health consequences. No one can achieve their true potential without steady nutrition.

The truth that hunger can have enduring effects has a hopeful flip side. If we can move the dial and create a food-secure community, the results of our efforts can change the lives of people and families for generations to come. Access to reliable nutrition creates a brighter future for all.





The work of the coalition is two-pronged. While we must endeavor to fill the immediate needs of those in our community, we know we have to keep our sights on developing lasting solutions. Because the causes of food insecurity in our diverse population are various, we acknowledge that there will be no single quick fix.

While we have been indebted to the work of many other researchers and other studies on hunger from around the country, this report breaks some new ground. It is one of the first reports of its kind to be produced in the wake of COVID-19. That national crisis revealed many structural weaknesses in our shared food supply and emphasized how disasters and economic downturns have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable. These lessons have only highlighted the importance of creating a food security system that can withstand whatever social or economic disruptions the future brings.

“Hunger is debilitating. It stimulates physical pain, anger, lethargy and depression. . . Imagine the shame and humiliation parents experience when their children miss meals.”

—Jeremy Everett, Executive Director, Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty

## Where We Are Now

To date, the Hometown Food Security Project has gathered critical stakeholders including those from school and governmental programs, nonprofits, businesses and religious organizations. The desire to share knowledge, participate and explore innovative new ways to collaborate has been universal and heartening. This report aims to create a comprehensive community assessment and a map of the assets that are currently in place.

With a problem as complex and intractable as food insecurity, community assessments are a crucial part of organizing for change. They help develop a deeper understanding of a community's strengths, needs, history, assets and social and cultural structure. With this knowledge we can identify where resources can be best used and understand why some populations fall into the gaps. Our hope is that this report will be the foundational document that creates a vibrant discussion between community leaders about how to optimize our efforts and build new collaborations that will increase our collective effectiveness.

### The Challenge

Despite the valiant and concerted efforts of many organizations, community leaders and volunteers, food insecurity statistics have stayed roughly the same in the county over the last decade.<sup>2</sup> According to Feeding America, Mower County had a food insecurity rate of 8.4% in 2020<sup>3</sup>. While this is below the national average of 11.8%<sup>4</sup> it is significantly above the Minnesota state average of 6%. We believe that Mower County has the resources, knowledge and community spirit not only to reduce food insecurity below the state average, but also to become a shining example of how to address small-town hunger both across the state and the nation.

### RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY

NATIONALLY - 2020

11.8%



MINNESOTA - 2020

6%



MOWER COUNTY - 2020

8.4%







“Food insecurity is on a downward trajectory in the U.S. This is due to economic growth, a strong agricultural supply chain, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Those who will remain food insecure despite these broader trends are some of the most vulnerable in our midst, including those with mental and physical health disabilities. To address this will require creative solutions at the community level by those who most fully understand the challenges facing the most vulnerable among us. Mower County will be at the forefront of these efforts and will serve as a template for other communities who seek to help all our neighbors escape food insecurity.”

—Craig Gundersen, Snee Family Endowed Chair, Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty (BCHP) Professor, Department of Economics

# Hometown Food Security Coalition - Progress and Key Milestones

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## May 2022

**Hormel Foods** convened area partners to discuss the challenge of hunger in Mower County. **Toward Food Security 2025: A Case for Change Summit** brought together over 40 leaders representing more than 20 local organizations.

- The **United Way** presented Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap data on food insecurity in Mower County. Food insecurity rates had remained relatively unchanged for ~10 years.
- The **Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty (BCHP)** presented ways to address food insecurity by utilizing a research-based toolkit for Hunger Free Community Coalitions.
- **Attention Span Media** facilitated small group discussions and gathered preliminary feedback on Mower County food insecurity issues.
- Molly Lanke of the **United Way of Mower County** agreed to be the project lead and initiated coalition-building efforts.



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## June 2022

The Coalition Startup Team (the Operations, or "Ops" team) was formed to begin planning and implementing our new collaboration, the **Hometown Food Security Project**.

- Members included Molly Lanke, United Way; Tammy Snee, Community Advocate; and Katie Fedoryk and Stephanie Postma, Hormel Foods.

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## August 2022

The Ops team expanded to form our Hometown Food Security Project Coalition, or "Core" team. Informed by the **Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty's Toolkit for Developing and Strengthening Hunger Free Community Coalitions**, eleven members representing key community sectors and populations will drive initial blueprint phases, including a community needs assessment.

- Coalition members include Major Jeff Strickler (The Salvation Army), Mary Weikum (Austin Public Schools), Nancy Donahue (Mower County Seniors), Varinh Van Vugt (Welcome Center), Gema Alvarado Guerrero (Riverland Community College, Austin Aspires), Sara Lee (Mayo Clinic Health System), Jennie Crews (Mower County Health & Human Services), Molly Lanke (United Way), Katie Fedoryk (Hormel Foods), Stephanie Postma (Hormel Foods), and Tammy Snee (Community Advocate).
- Coalition members meet weekly through November. Stephanie Postma facilitates meetings using "Agile" methodology to ensure resources are leveraged for maximum impact. Agile is a mindset that is defined by four values, described by twelve principles, and manifested through an unlimited number of practices or different ways of working.

Source: Business Agility Institute





Community Assessment  
Forum #1



Tammy Snee thanks people on  
behalf of the Hometown Food  
Security Project for their help  
with the backpack program.

Source: Austin Daily Herald

## October 2022

- Together at the Table: Hunger and Poverty Summit. Hosted by Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty.

## November 2022

The Core team executed a key blueprint step: Asset Mapping

- Information regarding food resources, gaps and barriers in Mower County was collected through public forums and community-wide surveys. Findings will help the Coalition compile the Community Assessment Report, and identify priority action areas.

## December 2022

Core team asked for assistance from Hormel Foods in the communications arena. This included:

- Writing the Community Assessment Report and developing a communication strategy including elements like social media, project website, etc.
- Creating and sharing a Resource Website to coordinate coalition efforts and as a centralized, one-stop source for people seeking food security support. They met to review Asset Mapping results and discuss implications.

## September 2022 - January 2023

Local food security opportunities enabled the Core team to meet immediate needs in the community, including:

- Snack packing event at Hormel Foods Spirit Week.
- Salvation Army community dinners, supplemental support.
- Backpack packing event with chef Carla Hall at Austin Public Schools.

## January - February 2023

- The Core team pursued research, coalition engagement and writing of the Hometown Food Security's Community Assessment Report.
- Coalition members met to review and finalize Hometown Food Security needs and assets assessment report.

## March 2023

- Core team completed the missing components of their Strategic Plan, such as Goals and Action teams.
- Community members who opted to participate were invited to the Action team creation work.





## Stakeholders Involved

This report, and the coalition's progress so far, could not have been possible without the engagement of leaders from the local NGOs, food banks and pantries, and officials from school districts and state and local governments. The many volunteers who work in conjunction with these organizations have also been a valued resource. Our Hometown Food Security Project is fortunate to have guidance from national leaders and researchers. In particular, the staff and leadership of the **Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty** provided sage advice and direction.



Taken together, the participants in the Hometown Food Security Project hold a wealth of critical knowledge about the populations they serve, barriers to access and resources, and the difficulties involved in making lasting change.

The leadership at **Hormel Foods** has been important to the work of the coalition. Hormel Foods team members have provided logistical, communications, organizational and operational support in addition to other institutional resources and funding.



## Coalition Advisors

Our Hometown Food Security Project is fortunate to have guidance from leaders in the national food security arena, especially from the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. BCHP uses the tools of research, policy and practice to cultivate evidence-based solutions to the challenges of food and economic injustice. BCHP proudly supports a network of Hunger Free Communities, especially across Texas. Our coalition has relied heavily on their **Toolkit for Hunger Free Community Coalitions** throughout our organizational and planning process.



## Coalition Members



**Tammy Snee**

Community Advocate

Tammy Snee is a registered nurse with a master's degree who has worked for the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., as a nurse manager in the Mayo Clinic Health System in Homecare Hospice and as a director in primary care. She is on the board of directors for the Sacred Heart Care Center. Tammy is passionate about food security and believes empowering individuals through education is the key to comprehensive change. She and her husband, Hormel Foods CEO Jim Snee, established an endowed chair at Baylor University to research food security through the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty. Tammy serves on the organization's board of advocates.



**Gema Alvarado-Guerrero**

Riverland Community College

Gema is a second-generation Latinx who has called Minnesota home for over 20 years. She advocates for education because it is the way to overcome generational poverty. As an adjunct instructor at Riverland Community College and a high school navigator with Austin Aspires, she works alongside students throughout their educational journey. Previously, she spent six years as executive director of the Parenting Resource Center, and now serves on the board of directors for Propel Nonprofits and the Austin Public Library Board. Gema is a licensed graduate social worker (LGSW) who holds a master's degree in clinical social work, mini-MBA in nonprofit management and undergraduate degree in general psychology.



**Mary Weikum**

Austin Public Schools

Mary is a leader in combating childhood food insecurity. In 2007, she started the Summer Lunch Program in Austin, a federal program that supports free meals for children of all ages. She also implemented free breakfasts for all students regardless of eligibility. In 2018, she created The Lunch Tray Project, which helps families who do not qualify for lunch benefits. She began working for Austin Public Schools Food & Nutrition Services in 2001 and became director in 2005. She is a native of Austin, Minn., a graduate of Riverland Community College and she majored in elementary education at Mankato State University.





**Stephanie K. Postma**

Hormel Foods



Stephanie is a seasoned business leader who runs the Agile practice dubbed Catapult at Hormel Foods. Catapult focuses on solving business issues through coaching, training and facilitation in non-technical settings. At Hormel Foods she's worked in various retail field sales and corporate retail roles, from category management and sales strategy to brand management. Stephanie is a member of the Austin Public Library board and the Food Marketing Advisory Board at Western Michigan University. She is also a mentor with the Minnesota Adult & Teen Challenge women's program in Rochester, Minn. She received her BBA from Western Michigan University and MBA from the University of Iowa.



**Sara Lee**

Mayo Clinic Health System



Sara is a community engagement manager at Mayo Clinic, serving as an extension of the clinical practice. She represents Mayo Clinic and Mayo Clinic Health System on multiple initiatives that address health priorities in the community. She also leads advisory committees on health equity and has a passion to address health issues in multicultural communities. She is a board member of the Austin Rotary and the United Way of Mower County. Sara received her undergraduate degree from Augustana University and her master's in public affairs, with an emphasis in public health, from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.



**Major Jeff Strickler**

The Salvation Army



Jeff was born in Illinois, raised in Iowa, but has lived in Minnesota longer than anywhere else. He has worked for The Salvation Army since 1981 and served as a Salvation Army officer (an ordained minister) since 1986 with his wife Cindy. Together they have served various Salvation Army appointments in Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Nebraska and Minnesota. They were appointed to serve in Austin, Minn., in February 2019. They have two adult daughters who both reside in the Twin Cities along with two grandchildren.



**Katie Fedoryk**

Hormel Foods



Katie is a corporate communications manager at Hormel Foods with responsibilities in the areas of internal communications, media relations and brand publicity. She also helps manage key global-impact programs and projects related to education and food security. Katie has been with the company since 2007, having held positions of increasing responsibility for several Hormel Foods functions. She joined the award-winning corporate communications team in 2018. In true Minnesota fashion, Katie is an avid hockey fan and a former player who has served as a volunteer coach of young people. She received her BA in communications from Augsburg University.



### **Jennie Crews**

Mower County Health & Human Services

Jennie is the financial assistance supervisor at Mower County Health & Human Services, overseeing several financial assistance programs, including SNAP, several cash programs and Medical Assistance. Jennie grew up in Mower County and is a lifelong resident. She joined Mower County in 2016 and performed various roles before taking on the supervisor role in 2022. Jennie is a graduate of both Southland High School and Riverland Community College.



### **Varinh Van Vugt**

Welcome Center/Parenting Resource Center

Varinh was born in the Napho Refugee camp in Thailand, and shortly after, in 1987, her family moved to Austin. Her lived experience with poverty and immigration fuels her passion for improving the lives of others. She is program coordinator for the Welcome Center and a member of the Austin Human Rights Commission and City of Austin's Charter Commission. Varinh currently serves on the board of directors for Austin Aspires, the Salvation Army Advisory Board and the Austin Positive Action Coalition. Her dedication to the community is seen in her participation in many committees including the Homeless Response Team and Mower Refreshed Steering Committee.



### **Molly Lanke**

United Way

Molly is a Pella, Iowa, native who has proudly called Austin, Minn., home since 2017. She graduated from Iowa State University with a dual degree in communications and political science and a certification in community planning and leadership. She joined the United Way of Mower County (UWMC) as its marketing and resource development coordinator and was promoted to executive director in 2019. Molly currently serves on the board of directors for the Hormel Foundation, the United Ways of Minnesota Association, and is active on a number of local committees including the Digital Equity Steering Committee and Austin Aspires' Leadership Table.



### **Nancy Donahue**

Mower County Senior Center

Nancy heads the Mower County Senior Advocacy Program at the Mower County Senior Center in Austin, Minn. Nancy provides seniors with information assistance on a variety of topics, such as Medicare, property tax forms, prescription assistance, housing applications, transportation options and health insurance counseling. She grew up and went to school in Watertown, Minn., about 50 miles west of Minneapolis, and has been advocating for seniors at the senior center in Austin since 1988.





## A Letter of Support

As a major employer in the county for over 130 years, Hormel Foods has deep roots in Mower County. In addition to our offices and plant facilities, we have made unique and long-term contributions to our community through the Hormel Institute and the Hormel Foundation. This multigenerational perspective is why we are dedicated to supporting the Hometown Food Security Coalition. Together with the many coalition partners, we hope to create change that will improve the lives of people and their families for decades to come.

Over the years, our community has faced difficult challenges. We've supported our country through two world wars, weathered economic crises and welcomed refugees from around the world. Most recently, we came together to face the challenge of a worldwide pandemic. With hard work and goodwill we have always risen to the challenges. Our community represents the best of what America stands for.

In this spirit, the Hometown Food Security Project has committed to making systemic changes to ensure that all our citizens can live rich and rewarding lives without fear of hunger. Creating a food-secure community will have countless downstream benefits for us all. Children will thrive and learn, families will be more stable, and individuals will be more productive and healthy. To improve people's lives and to make positive change in our community – there is no better place to put our shoulders to the wheel.

Already, the coalition has tapped into a wellspring of compassion and community spirit. We are fortunate to have many dedicated agencies, religious organizations and nonprofits including the United Way, Salvation Army, the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty and Attention Span Media. I believe our collective effort will become an inspiration and template for other communities across the country. I'm confident that I can speak for all of our team members to say that we at Hormel Foods are fully behind this effort.

Jim Snee  
Chairman of the Board, President and Chief Executive Officer  
Hormel Foods







# Introduction to Food Insecurity

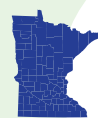
## Food Insecurity: a National Perspective

Food insecurity is a serious and persistent issue in the United States. Despite some gains, eliminating food insecurity nationally has proved challenging. Currently, nearly 34 million people – more than one out every ten Americans – experience food insecurity.<sup>5</sup>

Poverty is one of the factors related to food insecurity, but the problem is multifaceted. Food insecurity is not evenly distributed across geography, demographics, or even income levels.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that a community-by-community understanding of the problem may be crucial to closing the hunger gap.

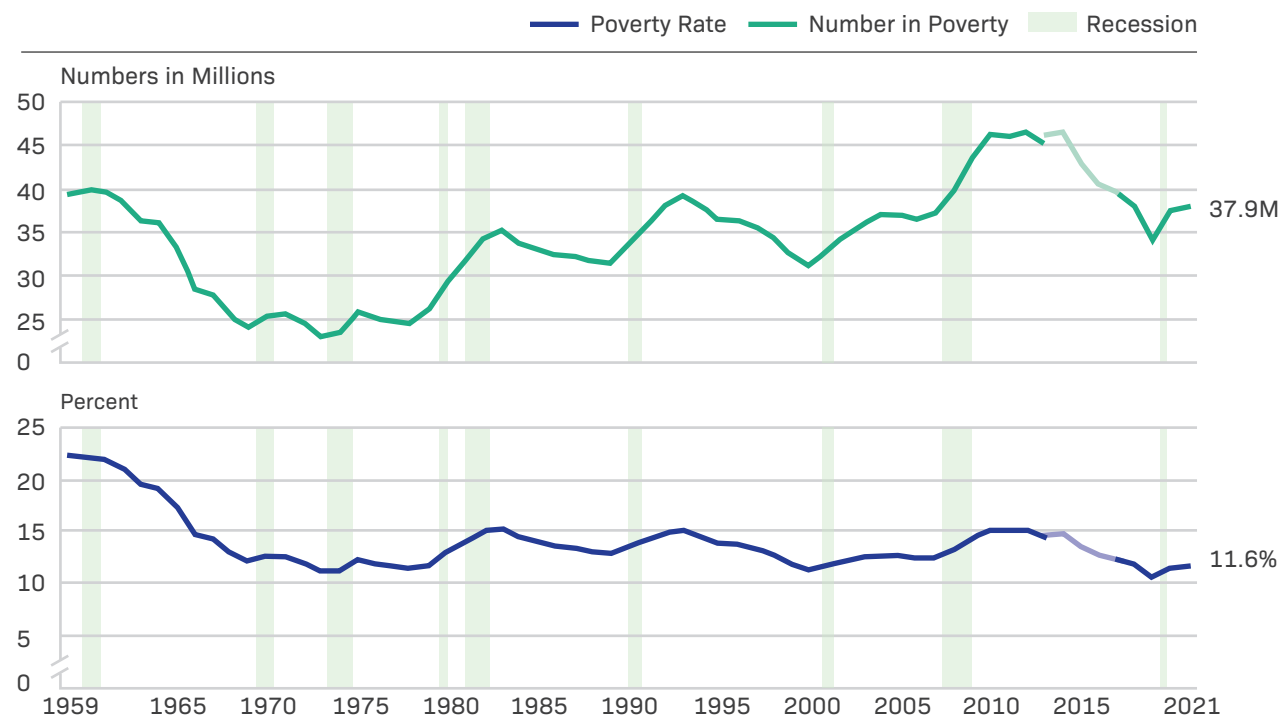
There are many causes for food insecurity that often overlap and compound each other, including poverty, disabilities, job loss, recently incarcerated, immigration status, etc. The prevalence of these forces – and how they interact – differs from community to community. Some locales may have higher rates of homebound elderly, for example, while others may have more first generation immigrant communities struggling with cultural and language barriers. The resources available to provide for these pockets of need also differ from community to community. A deep understanding of these groups is critical for organizing outreach, implementing solutions and measuring their effectiveness.

### MINNESOTA POVERTY RATE (2021)



9.3%

## HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY POVERTY IN THE U.S.?



Source: [United States Census Bureau](#)

## Poverty Level

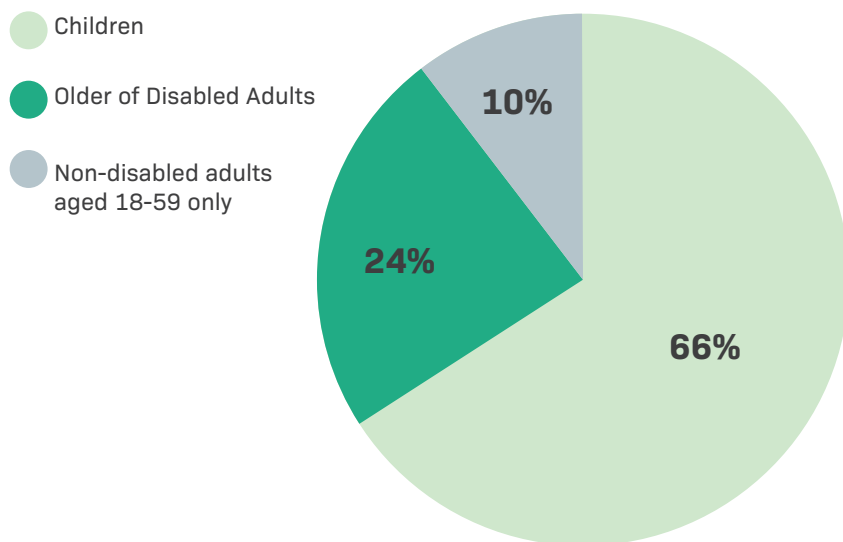
The poverty level is the monetary threshold representing the minimum level of income or resources needed to meet basic needs such as housing, food/nutrition or clothing in a given country. The poverty level, also referred to as the poverty line or PL, is set by the government. It can vary across countries, regions as well as over time due to variable factors such as economic stability and

inflation, among others.<sup>7</sup> **As of 2021, the poverty rate in Minnesota was estimated to be around 9.3%.<sup>8</sup>** A version of this indicator is used to determine eligibility for various governmental programs including SNAP.

## Overview of Food Support Programs in America

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as SNAP, is our nation's broadest food safety net, designed for the most vulnerable people and families in our communities. Eighty-five percent of SNAP benefits go to households with children, elderly or people with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

### MAKEUP OF HOUSEHOLDS THAT RECEIVE SNAP



Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

From 1939 to 1943 and 1961 to 1964, food stamp programs were piloted to provide food relief to those with great need. In 1964, The Food Stamp Act was passed into law, making the program permanent. In the 2000s, the program was modernized to operate via EBT and renamed as SNAP.<sup>10</sup>


In 2019, prior to the pandemic, the average monthly SNAP benefit was \$230 per month, with 35.7 million people participating and total program benefits of \$55.6 billion.<sup>11</sup>

### TFP

The Thrifty Food Plan is one of four food plans the USDA develops that estimates the cost of a healthy diet across various price points – the Thrifty, Low-Cost, Moderate-Cost and Liberal Food Plans. The Thrifty Food Plan is the lowest cost of the four. It represents a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet prepared at home for a “reference” family, which is defined in law as an adult male and female, ages 20-50, and two children, ages 6-8 and 9-11. This definition does not impact household eligibility for SNAP.

Source: USDA





“I think some of these benefits are ending because there is an assumption that as we’re emerging from the pandemic, things have returned to normal. But the reality is that people are faring worse than they did pre-COVID.”

—Danah Craft, Executive Director, Feeding Georgia

During COVID-19, all eligible recipients received the maximum benefit for their household size. This incremental benefit ended in February 2023. By 2021, 41.2 million people were being assisted, with total benefits of 113.2 billion. A portion of the increased cost is due to an October 2021 increase to the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) calculation, the first adjustment in decades.<sup>12</sup>

As important and effective as the program is, studies have shown that SNAP benefits alone are inadequate for maintaining a healthy diet. The key word in the program is “supplemental,” meaning that it was not designed to provide the resources that would cover all food expenses for an individual or a family. Studies indicate that, in regular conditions, around 90% of the benefits are often depleted after the third week of the month.<sup>13</sup>

Much smaller support programs include the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) at \$5 billion in 2021, and the free and reduced school lunch and breakfast programs (National School Lunch Program, or NSLP), the Special Breakfast Program (SBP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) with a combined spending of \$26.8 billion in 2021.

While the importance of SNAP has grown over the decades, funding of the program is often a contentious political issue when federal budgets are proposed and debated. It is currently part of the Farm Bill, which is due for its 5-year renewal in 2023.<sup>14</sup> Changing political leadership at both the state and national levels may have a dramatic impact on the amount of resources available through the program. SNAP will continue to be a critical part of our social safety net, but the amount of assistance and eligibility details will likely fluctuate with political tides. These adjustments will have immediate impacts on the food security rates in Mower County, and throughout the country.

## SNAP Benefits During Covid and the Looming “Hunger Cliff”

The dramatic increase in benefit size and overall cost of the program reflect emergency allotments in response to the Covid crisis and the massive disruption of our nation’s economy and food system. In October 2021, the USDA also increased rates by 21% to adjust for higher cost of food (the “Thrifty Food Plan” budget), the first increase since 1975.

This emergency allotment due to Covid expired in February, so unless new assistance is passed into law, or supplemented on the state level, many have stopped receiving the supplemental benefit in March, a large sudden drop. This decline, along with inflation and a still struggling economy, has some experts predicting a coming “hunger cliff” across the country. The most affected will likely be the elderly. Benefits for some could drop from \$281 to as little as \$23 a month. States where emergency allocations have already ended have seen a surge of demand at food banks, often overwhelming the resources of these operations.<sup>15</sup>

The ongoing benefits will still be a significant increase from pre-pandemic levels. For families who applied for SNAP during the crisis, however, the reductions may come as an unwelcome surprise.

“There are still a number of households in which both parents are working and are living paycheck to paycheck because everything nowadays is so expensive. They don’t make enough but yet they make too much to qualify for SNAP. I think that is the subset of the population that is really getting missed and it’s being affected the worst.”

—Jennie Crews, Financial Assistance Supervisor,  
Mower County Health & Human Services

## Defining Food Insecurity

At a high level, the USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. This can be a temporary situation for an individual and/or family or last a longer time. However, as it is described throughout this report, food insecurity is a much more complex and nuanced issue and each household lies somewhere along a continuum ranging from what is described as “high food security” to “very low food security.”

In 2006, the USDA introduced the following labels to more specifically categorize food security in four ranges:<sup>16</sup>

### Food Secure

#### High Food Security

Households had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food.

#### Marginal Food Security

Households had problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.

### Food Insecure

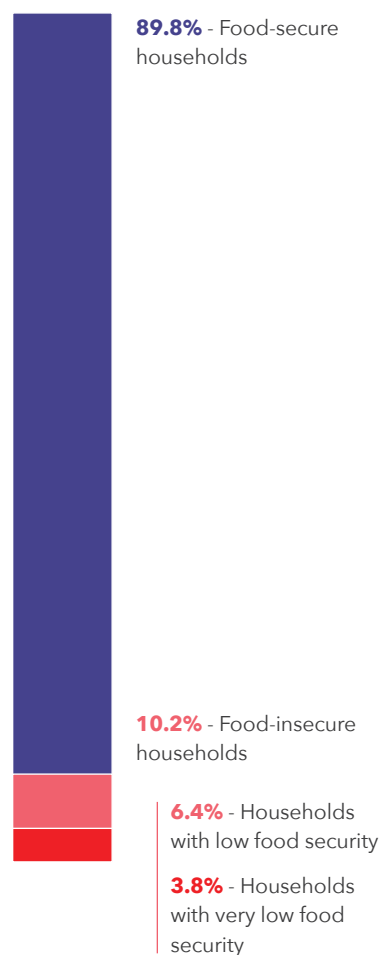
#### Low Food Security

Households reduced the quality, variety and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.

#### Very Low Food Security

At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food.<sup>17</sup>

#### U.S. HOUSEHOLDS BY FOOD SECURITY STATUS



Source: USDA

# Measuring Food Insecurity in the United States

Food security has traditionally been measured in the United States using the USDA's Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The survey is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the USDA's Economic Research Service. It measures household food security in the United States, including the availability of adequate food and the ability of households to access it. This information is used by government agencies, nonprofits and researchers to understand and address issues of food insecurity in the country.

## Map the Meal Gap

Map the Meal Gap is an annual study conducted by nonprofit organization Feeding America, the largest charity working to end hunger in the United States. The data-driven study provides county-level estimates of food insecurity and measures the gap between the need for food assistance and the resources available to meet the specific need. Data is based on the USDA's Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey referenced above along with supplementary demographic and economic data sources.



### Survey Questions Used by USDA to Assess Household Food Security

1. "We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
2. "The food that we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
3. "We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?
4. In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in the household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)
5. (If yes to question 4) How often did this happen – almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?
6. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)
7. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn't eat, because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)
8. In the last 12 months, did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)
9. In the last 12 months did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food? (Yes/No)



## Determinants of Food Insecurity

As we look into the issue of food insecurity at the national and local level, it is critical to better understand the underlying factors that contribute to an individual or household's ability to access sufficient, nutritious food. These fall under the following three categories: 1) economic stability; 2) social and community context; and 3) mental and physical health. They are key facets to incorporate when creating and designing a successful food security initiative.

### Economic Stability

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Wages
- Sudden household economic crisis
- Homelessness
- High rent-to-income ratios
- Regional economic downturn
- Lack of education, training opportunities and other employment enablers

### Social and Community Context

- Discrimination and/or systemic racism
- Immigration status
- Recent incarceration
- Language barriers
- Cultural food restrictions
- Rural isolation
- Shame as a barrier for accessing resources
- Lack of knowledge or understanding of resources
- Community-wide disasters

### Mental and Physical Health

- Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or other serious mental health challenges
- Physical disability
- Chronic disease
- Lack of access to healthcare
- Alcohol or drug addictions

10. (If yes to question 9) How often did this happen – almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

(Questions 11–18 were asked only if the household included children age 0–17)

11. “We relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed our children because we were running out of money to buy food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?

12. “We couldn’t feed our children a balanced meal, because we couldn’t afford that.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?

13. “The children were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months?

14. In the last 12 months, did you ever cut the size of any of the children’s meals because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)

15. In the last 12 months, were the children ever hungry but you just couldn’t afford more food? (Yes/No)

16. In the last 12 months, did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)

17. (If yes to question 16) How often did this happen – almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

18. In the last 12 months did any of the children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food? (Yes/No)

3

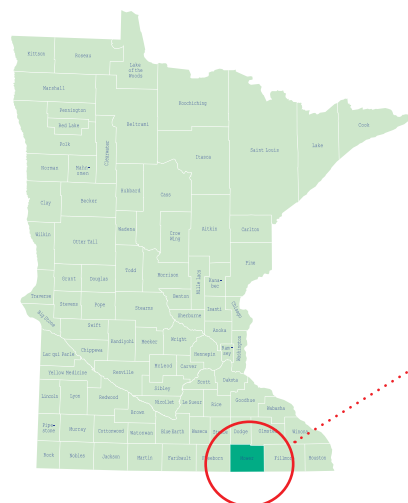
# Mower County

## Community Profile

### Overview

Mower County is located in southeast Minnesota. The county, which shares a border with Iowa, has a total land area of 711.33 sq. miles.<sup>1</sup> As of 2021 Census data, Mower County's population is 40,158 people living in 15,596 households.<sup>2</sup> Mower County's largest city and county seat, Austin, has a population of 26,225.

Owing to rich soil conditions and an advantageous climate, Mower County's economy was historically dominated by agriculture. Recent economic shifts, however, have contributed to the decline of agriculture's predominance. Manufacturing and service-sector jobs are now the most common sources of employment for residents of Mower County.



#### TOTAL POPULATION

# 40,158

2021

#### HOUSEHOLDS

# 15,596

2021

#### MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

# \$60.4k

2021

#### POVERTY RATE

# 11.6%

2021

#### CHILDREN LIVING BELOW POVERTY LINE

# 13.6%

2021 ESTIMATE. Feeding America reported 13.8% in 2020.

#### FOOD INSECURITY RATE

# 8.4%

2020

#### CHILD FOOD INSECURITY RATE

# 13.8%

2020



## History

Mower County was created by an act of the Minnesota State Legislature in 1855. The area had begun to attract settlers by this time, most of them arriving to pursue agriculture. Mower County's development accelerated with the introduction of railroads in the 1860s and 1870s. Small towns sprung up along the lines while Austin grew into a major agricultural shipping hub and railroad division center.

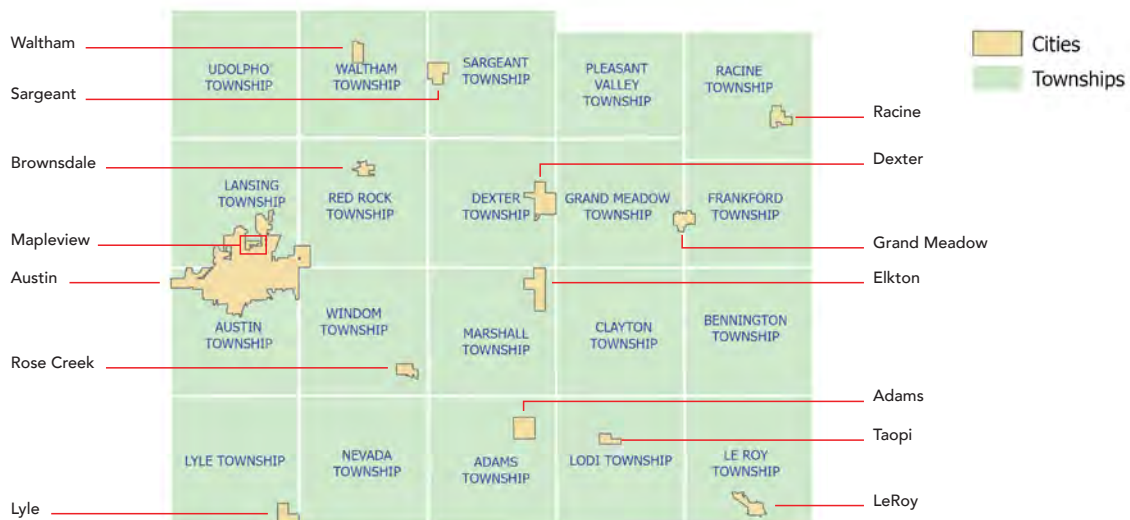
Mower County's population continued to grow through the first half of the 20th century, peaking at 48,498 in 1960. With the loss of the railroads, a decline in basic industry, and limited employment growth, the county's population began to decrease, falling as low as 37,385 in 1990. Since then, the population has risen back above 40,000.<sup>3</sup>

# Mower County

Township	Population (2022)
Adams	443
Austin	873
Clayton	170
Dexter	250
Frankford	389
Grand Meadow	340
Lansing	922
Le Roy	342
Lodi	236
Lyle	369
Marshall	312
Nevada	335
Pleasant Valley	285
Racine	470
Red Rock	719
Sargeant	289
Udolpho	412
Waltham	358
Windom	518
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,032</b>

City	Population (2022)
Adams	676
Austin	26,175
Dexter	321
Elkton	129
Grand Meadow	1,137
Lansing (CDP)	131
Le Roy	950
Lyle	511
Mapleview	153
Racine	453
Rose Creek	394
Sargeant	62
Taopi	61
Waltham	163
<b>Total</b>	<b>31,316</b>

## MOWER COUNTY TOWNSHIPS AND CITIES





## Income Levels and Poverty

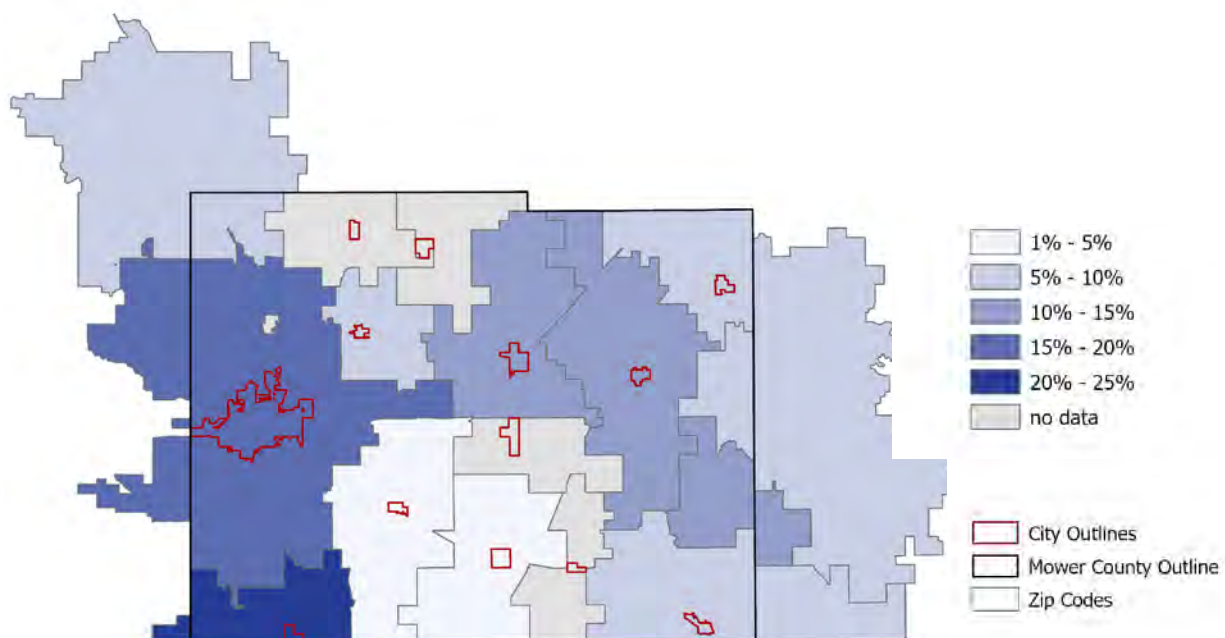
The median household income in Mower County was \$60,386 in 2021, 14.7% lower than the national average of \$70,784.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, 11.6% of Mower County residents were living below the poverty level, including 13.6% of families with children. According to a statewide report published in 2022, approximately 50% of children qualify for free or reduced school lunch.<sup>5</sup>



While the median household income for Mower County residents is up from \$44,497 in 2010,<sup>6</sup> the Austin Daily Herald reported in November 2022 that increasing food prices due to inflation continue to take their toll on residents' buying power.

Zip Code*	Population (2022)
55909	1,508
55912	28,658
55917	3,626
55918	926
55926	823
55933	273
55936	1,914
55950	169
55951	1,579
55953	832
55961	501
55967	1,192
55970	1,161
55973	285
55975	4,475
55977	203
55982	436
<b>Total</b>	<b>48,561</b>

\*Note: Zip codes include some areas beyond Mower County.

### MOWER COUNTY POVERTY RATE BY ZIP CODE





## Diversity / Immigrant and Ethnic Communities

According to the 2020 Census, 75.2% of Mower County residents identify as White (non-hispanic/latino).<sup>7</sup> The largest minority groups are Hispanic or Latino (12.8%), Asian (5.8%) and Black or African American (4.2%).<sup>8</sup> These figures represent a population whose racial diversity is steadily increasing. There has been a big shift in the twenty years since the 2000 census, when 94.7% of Mower County residents identified as White.<sup>9</sup> Two decades before, in 1980, the proportion was even higher at 98.2%.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years, Mower County has experienced rapid growth of its immigrant communities. Between 2017 and 2021, individuals born in another country made up 10.9% of the county's population.<sup>11</sup> Many of these immigrants come from African countries such as Benin, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, and frequently work in the meatpacking industry.<sup>12</sup> Evidence of Mower County's increasing ethnic diversity can be seen in the public schools, where an estimated 50 languages are spoken.<sup>13</sup>

Many business owners and residents are grateful for the revitalizing effects of these demographic shifts. Without this growing workforce, the food-products industry that lies at the heart of the region's economy would likely be experiencing substantial worker shortages. "The leadership [from the local companies] has been particularly cognizant of the need to be welcoming," says local attorney Sara Karki. "They need everyone who's coming to fill the jobs that they have – and they're still often short of workers."<sup>14</sup>

**Jean Weke**, a Beninese resident of Austin and Hormel Foods employee, recalls moving to the area in 2010.

"We were about five people from Benin. Today, we're more than 500 in the community. People are moving here to Austin because we talk to them about Austin, how good it is to live in Austin, how it's easier to find a job and get a degree."<sup>15</sup>

The arrival of so many immigrants to Mower County has not only had an energizing effect on local economies, but has played an important role in reversing the population decline that began during the second half of the 20th century. The Minnesota-based Center for Rural Policy and Development published a report examining the effects of immigration on the populations of Mower and Nobles counties. The report concludes that "in-migration has driven up these counties' overall populations and has done so within a region where nearly all other counties are experiencing population declines."<sup>16</sup>

"Before I moved to America, I had always heard about the American dream. You know, when you go to America, you can be anything. When I first moved here, I saw how the real America is. In America there's opportunity but opportunity doesn't just come at your door. The first step, I realized, was getting an education. But that is difficult if you are hungry. I grew up in a refugee camp where if you had one meal a day you were lucky. Moving to America, I never thought that food insecurity would follow me here."

– Oballa Oballa, Hormel Production Supervisor and former Austin City Council Member

## Employment and Economic Drivers

### Employment

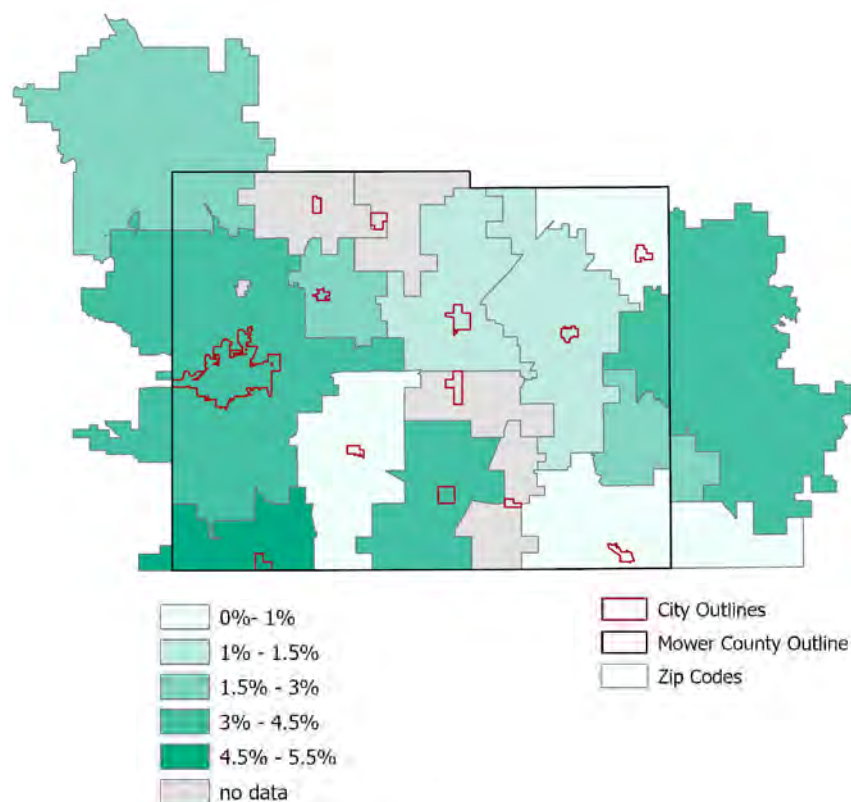
Mower County had an employed population of 14,292 as of 2020.<sup>17</sup> The unemployment rate of 2.8% as of Dec. 2022, is lower than the national average of 3.4%.<sup>18</sup> The most common employment sectors in Mower County are Manufacturing (4,613 people), Health Care & Social Assistance (3,467), Retail (1,751) and Education (1,574).<sup>19</sup>

According to a report published by the Development Corporation of Austin, the four largest employers in the county's largest city are Hormel Foods, Quality Pork Processors, Mayo Clinic Health Systems and the Austin Public Schools.<sup>20</sup>

### Unique Economic Driver: Hormel Foods

Mower County's economic situation is unique. Despite being a largely rural county, Austin is home to Hormel Foods, a 132-year-old Fortune 500, global branded food company. In addition to directly employing thousands and indirectly supporting thousands of additional local businesses and farms, Hormel Foods team members are active volunteers and leaders in our community. In addition to food donations, both domestically and internationally, Hormel team members have been active locally, organizing and supporting a variety of events including food drives, school backpack programs and senior meal deliveries.

MOWER COUNTY UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



In addition to the corporation, the **Hormel Foundation**, created by company founder George and son Jay Hormel, makes major donations to community initiatives each year. Funded by the company's stock dividends, the Foundation has \$1.5 billion in assets. In 2023, the foundation will distribute over \$21 million to nonprofit agencies in Mower County.<sup>21</sup>

Jay Hormel also founded the nonprofit **Hormel Institute**, a biomedical research laboratory operated by the Mayo Clinic and University of Minnesota with 140 local employees. Last year, \$12 million of its funding was provided by the Hormel Foundation,

while \$17.5 million came from federal and other research grants.

Taken together, Hormel Foods, the Hormel Foundation and the Hormel Institute are key economic drivers, creating a large portion of the jobs and opportunities in the county.



## Aging and Healthcare

The median age of Mower County residents is 39.1<sup>22</sup> and 25.5% of residents are under 18, while 18.3% are 65 and over.<sup>23</sup>

Of 87 Minnesota counties, Mower has the 17th largest average household size of 2.51 individuals per home.<sup>24</sup>

7.8% of Mower County residents are without any type of health insurance and 25% rely on medical assistance. The prevalence of

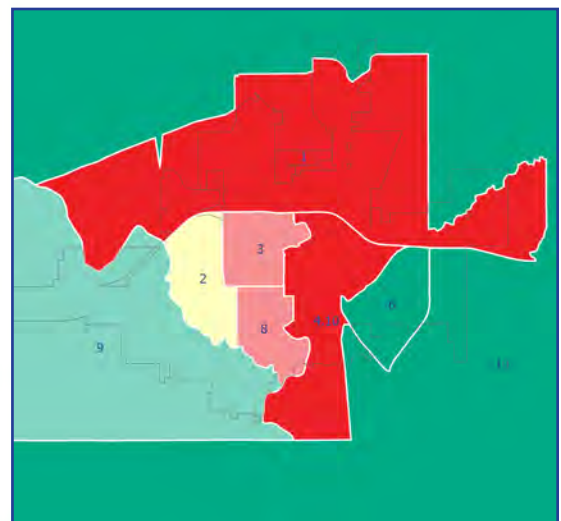
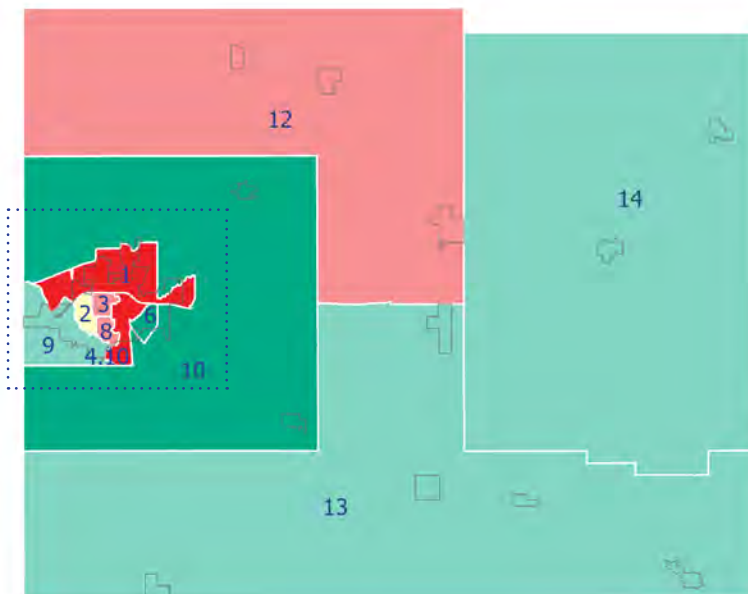
heart disease is 5.7%, and 6.5% of babies are born with a low birth weight. Each of these three rates are slightly below the national average.<sup>25</sup>

The average life expectancy of 79.9 years is slightly higher than the national average of 77.5.<sup>26</sup> By census tract, the rate ranges from 77 to 85.

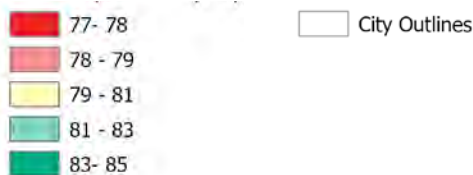
Mower County has one hospital, the nonprofit Mayo Clinic Health

System. The facility, located in Austin, provides primary, secondary, emergency and specialty care. County advocates, however, have expressed concerns about increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining physicians, a trend that is making appointments harder to get.<sup>27</sup>

### MOWER COUNTY LIFE EXPECTANCY



Area of detail: Austin





## Transportation

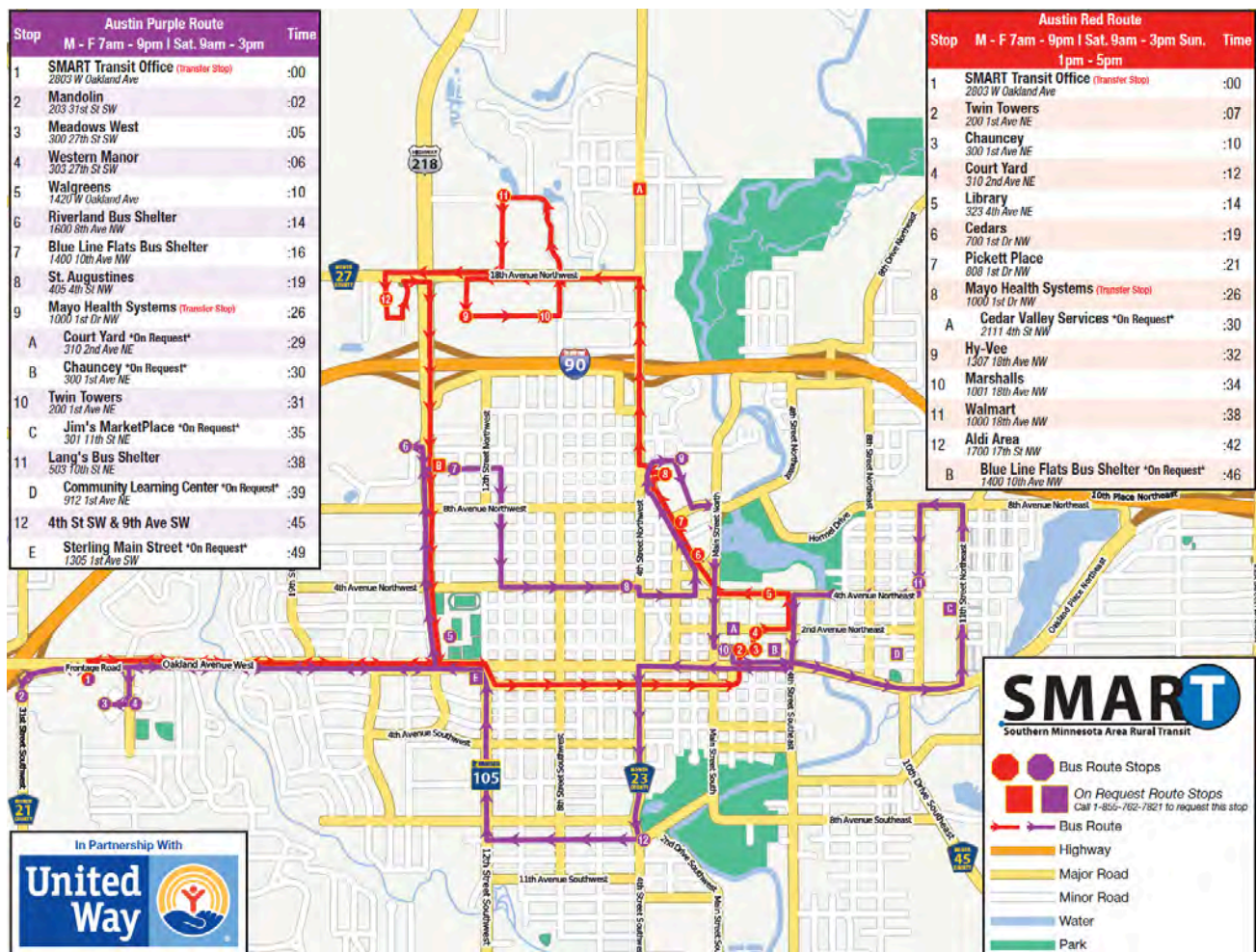
Personal vehicles are the most common method of transportation in Mower County. In 2020, 78.4% of workers reported that they drive alone to work, while 11.4% carpool. The average car ownership in the county is two per household.<sup>28</sup> 7.8% of residents do not have a vehicle and 28.8% have one vehicle.

Rideshares, including Uber and Lyft, are permitted but not yet available in the county. No major rental car companies have locations serving Mower.

The City of Austin is served by the Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit public transportation network.<sup>29</sup> Fares are generally \$2–\$3

for adults, \$1 for students and free for veterans and infants. Seniors can ride unlimited for \$30/month. A shuttle service to the hospital in Albert Lea is also available, as are limited route deviations for an additional fare.

### SOUTHERN MINNESOTA AREA RURAL TRANSIT MAP





## Affordable Housing

Housing costs and food security are often linked, and both are fundamental needs. However, food budgets are more flexible than monthly rents, and family incomes often force families to skimp on food purchases to ensure long-term shelter.

The Mower County Housing and Redevelopment Authority housing voucher program is a government-funded program – also known as Section 8 voucher – that provides rental assistance to eligible low-income families, seniors, singles and persons with disabilities supporting them in securing affordable housing. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The housing authority agency accepts applications to the program and issues the vouchers to eligible applicants, while also making the approved rental subsidy payment to the landlord. Participants pay approximately 30% of their income for rent and are able to take the voucher with them if they move.<sup>30</sup> On average, Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers provide Mower County landlords \$500 per month toward rent payments, with the average holder contributing \$300 toward rent. According to HUD data, Mower County has 6 assisted multifamily properties, 6 insured multifamily properties and 58 public housing buildings.

The Austin Housing and Redevelopment Authority (AHRA) has 205 public housing units in the city's Twin Towers. The wait list has nearly 100 applicants. Pickett Place offers 100 units for low-income tenants who pay 30% of their income for rents that range from \$50 to \$776 a month. There are over 100 applicants on the waitlist for Pickett Place. In addition, the AHRA manages 160 market rate rental units in two locations. The AHRA owns a fourplex for transitional housing for victims of crime, and homeless veterans. Low interest loans for qualifying homeowners or landlords are also provided by the AHRA.<sup>31</sup>

There are a limited number of units that can accommodate larger families, according to Taggart Medgaarden, executive director of Austin HRA. This makes it difficult to provide shelter to immigrant families that often rely on multigenerational structures.

The county currently has no emergency housing options, which is problematic as Medgaarden reports he has seen a rise of homelessness in the area. The region's susceptibility to severe weather makes the lack of emergency housing a potentially life-threatening situation.

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### TOTAL LOW-INCOME APARTMENTS

# 759

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### AVERAGE RENTER HOUSEHOLD SIZE

# 2.39

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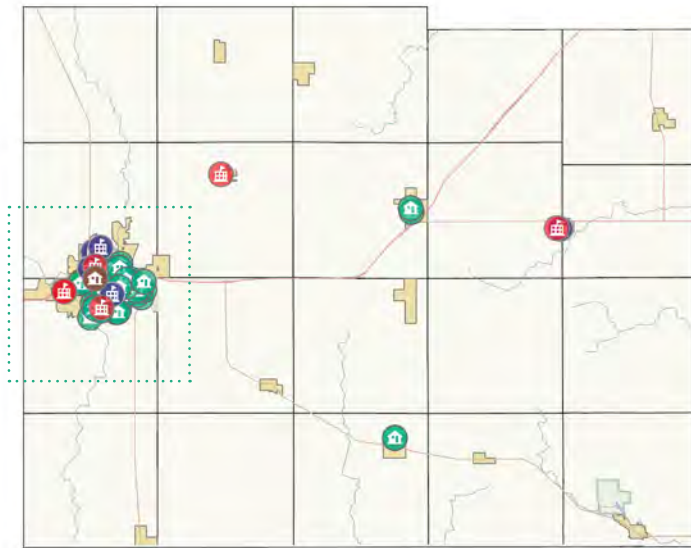
### PERCENTAGE OF RENTERS OVERBURDENED

# 48.31 ±5.99

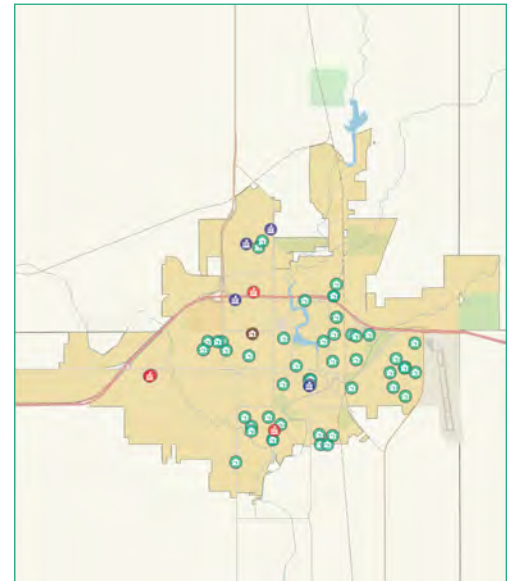
“When it comes to our Section 8 vouchers the problem is getting enough landlords to work with us. That is one of our biggest challenges. Sometimes they are resistant. Food and housing are the two major financial stresses for low-income families. In the winter you can see the path people take between the Twin Towers public housing units and the Salvation Army food bank.”

—Taggert Medgaarden, Executive Director, Austin HRA







## MOWER COUNTY AFFORDABLE HOUSING



Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS



Area of detail: Austin

-  Multifamily Properties - Insured
-  Multifamily Properties - Assisted
-  Low-Income Housing (LIHTC) Program
-  Public Housing Buildings
-  Cities
-  Township Outlines



## Education

89.4% Of Mower County residents aged 25 years or older, have obtained a high school diploma or higher. Of the same population, 24.6% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while 8.84% have an associate's degree.<sup>32</sup>

Students in Mower County attend 6 school districts, which educate 6,716 students. Austin Public Schools is the largest public school district in the county, with 15 schools that serve approximately 5,182 students and employ over 800 staff and faculty.

Austin Senior High is the largest school campus in Mower County, with 1,273 students enrolled during the 2021-2022 school year.<sup>33</sup> Around 40% of attending students are economically disadvantaged and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. According to the [U.S. News Best High School list](#), Austin Senior High is ranked #204 amongst Minnesota High Schools, out of a total of 866 high schools.

## Higher Education

**Riverland Community College** is the only institution of higher education in Mower County. As of fall 2021, Riverland's enrollment was 3,276, with 33% full-time students, and 71% aged 24 and under.<sup>34</sup> 42% of Riverland's students graduated with a degree or certificate program, and 14% transferred out of state.

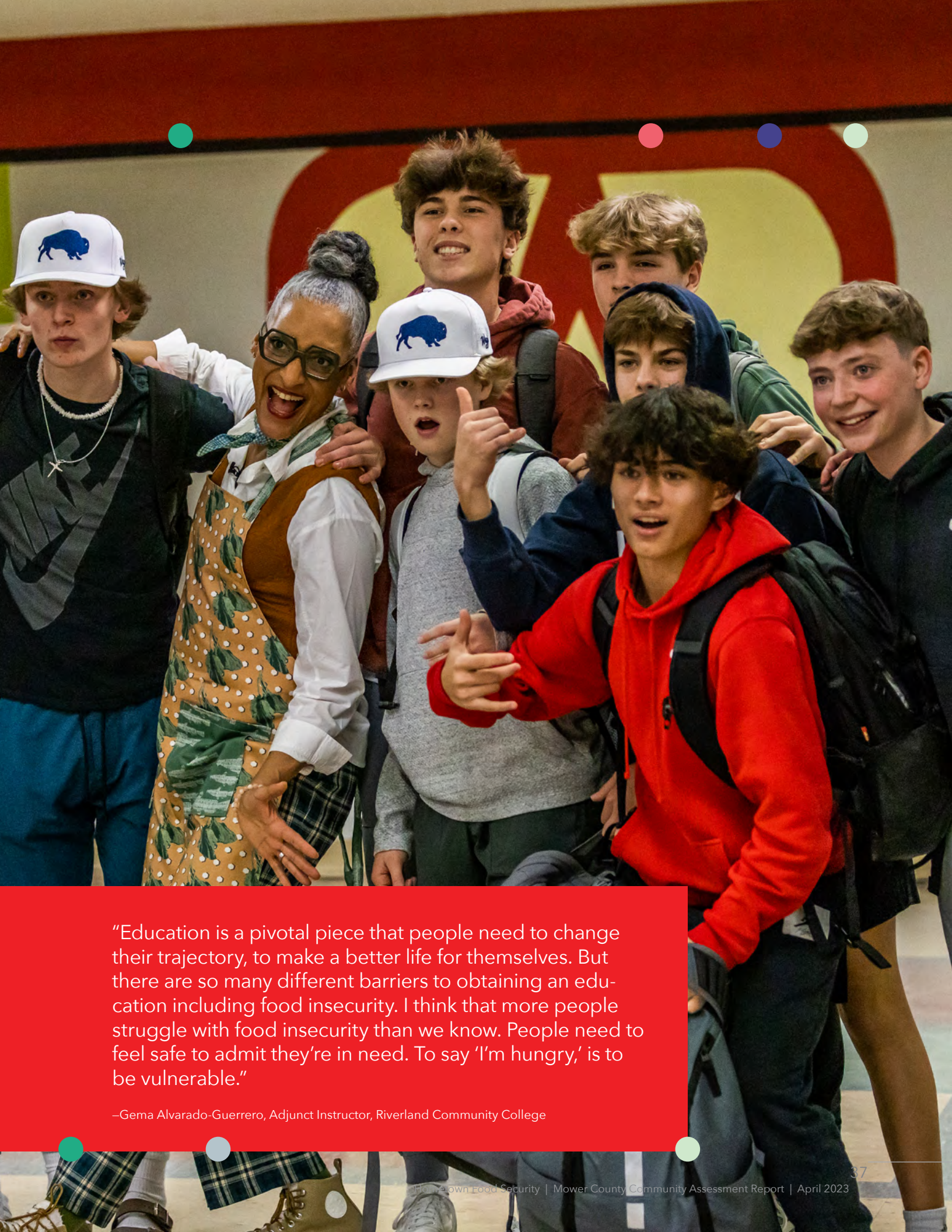
**Rochester Community and Technical College** and the **University of Minnesota Rochester** are in

neighboring Olmsted County, and serve some Mower County residents.

**The Hormel Foundation** provides a unique opportunity for students who attend and graduate from Austin High School or Pacelli Catholic School. Given completion of community service, the foundation, through their Austin Assurance Scholarship, will pay for two-year degree tuition at Riverland Community College.

For those who don't qualify for the **Austin Assurance Scholarship**, Hormel Foods – through its nationwide **Hormel Inspired Pathways** scholarship program – covers two-year degree tuition costs for the children of its team members at any in-state community college.





“Education is a pivotal piece that people need to change their trajectory, to make a better life for themselves. But there are so many different barriers to obtaining an education including food insecurity. I think that more people struggle with food insecurity than we know. People need to feel safe to admit they’re in need. To say ‘I’m hungry,’ is to be vulnerable.”

—Gema Alvarado-Guerrero, Adjunct Instructor, Riverland Community College



# 4

## Food Insecurity in Mower County

Based on the county's food insecurity rate of 8.4% (Map the Meal Gap, 2020), Mower County experiences food insecurity at a higher rate than the Minnesota average of 6%.<sup>35</sup>

According to statistics provided by Feeding America for 2009-2020, Mower County's food insecurity rate has fluctuated between a high of 11% and a low of 8.4%.

Mower County's food insecurity rate rose above the Minnesota average for the first time in 2018, and remained the case through 2020.

The growing number of county residents facing food insecurity follows the national pattern. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 3,720 county residents were food insecure, rising to a projected 4,020 residents in 2021.<sup>36</sup> During the same period, the national rate rose from 10.9% to 11.8%.

While there are a number of programs in place to help combat food insecurity in Mower County (food shelves, government assistance, charity organizations), numerous challenges remain. For example, food shelves can be difficult to access due to limited transportation options, inconvenient hours of operation and once-per-month access limits that strain the storage capacity of county residents while preventing them from regularly obtaining fresh food. Residents have also expressed difficulties in finding reliable and centralized information about food shelves. We hope that, by increasing focus on the issue, all organizations can better develop solutions to these and other obstacles, enabling them to more effectively serve the people of Mower County.



### FOOD INSECURITY RATE IN MOWER COUNTY

**8.4%**

### FOOD INSECURE HOUSEHOLDS THAT QUALIFY FOR SNAP IN MOWER COUNTY

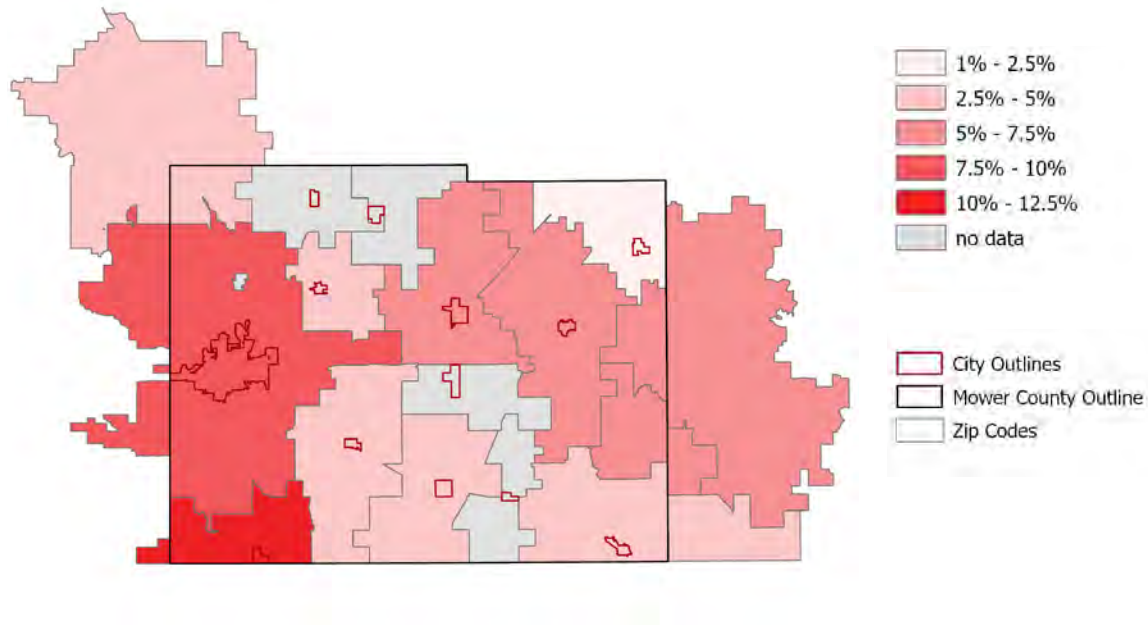
**74%**

### AVERAGE MEAL COST IN MOWER COUNTY

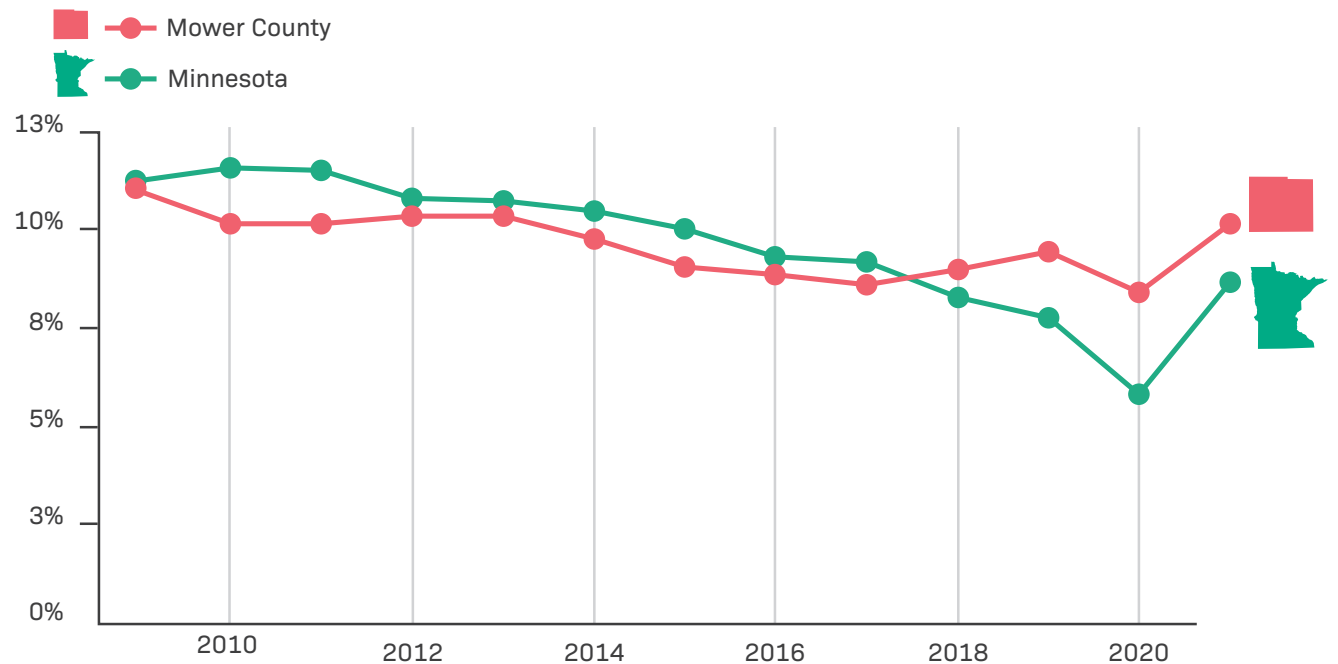
**\$3.02**



## MOWER COUNTY FOOD INSECURITY RATE



## FOOD INSECURITY RATE - MOWER COUNTY VS. MINNESOTA





## SNAP During Covid

Between December 2019 and December 2022, SNAP benefits distributed rose dramatically as did the number of recipients.

**The number of SNAP recipients rose from 3088 to 4163, a 34% increase.**

**Average monthly benefits per individual rose from \$88 to \$222, up over 250%.**

**Total monthly benefits paid out rose from \$274,144 to \$1,250,605, up over 450%.<sup>37</sup>**

When these emergency Covid benefits were phased out in March 2023, some families faced increased needs and sought increased assistance from other resources such as local food banks. It is important to note, however, that the post-pandemic SNAP benefits will be increased compared to pre-pandemic levels.

## SNAP as Economic Multiplier

Studies show that, in addition to benefiting direct recipients, SNAP fuels the local economy, generating \$1.79 of economic activity for every dollar received by a community member. Using 2022's Mower County SNAP totals, the \$10,742,859 in benefits, generated \$19,229,718 in local economic benefits.

If just half of those who are eligible for SNAP benefits but are not yet receiving them were to enroll, even at a conservative average of \$100/month, the economic benefit to Mower County would be **an additional \$5.3 million annually!**<sup>38</sup>





## Mapping the Meal Gap

According to Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap analysis, three-fourths (74%) of the 3,360 people in Mower County that are still food insecure would qualify for SNAP. The other quarter fall beyond the thresholds to qualify for SNAP and WIC programs.

At an average meal cost of \$3.02, Feeding America calculates that \$1.6 million would be needed "to purchase just enough to meet the food needs" of the food insecure in Mower County.<sup>39</sup>



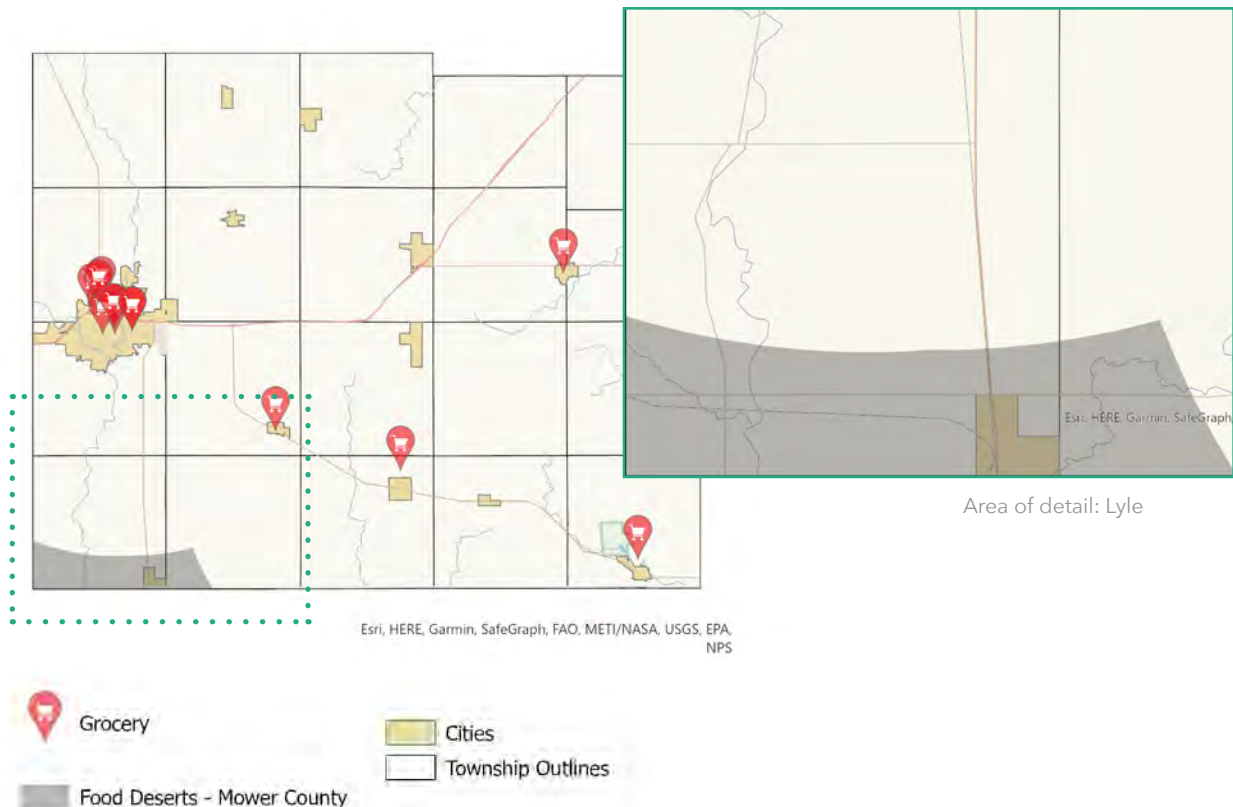
## Food Deserts

Food deserts are areas where residents do not have reliable access to nutritious or affordable food. According to the USDA criteria, for an area to be considered a food desert, it must fall below certain thresholds of income and food access. The income requirement is "a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the state-wide or metropolitan area median

family income."<sup>40</sup> Regarding food access, the criteria for an urban area is that "at least 500 people or 33% of the population must live more than 1 mile from the nearest large grocery store." For rural areas, "at least 500 people or 33% of the population must live more than 10 miles from the nearest large grocery store."<sup>41</sup>

Only a sliver of the county, around Lyle, meets this definition. While there is not a nearby large grocery store, residents of this area have access to a convenience store where food can be purchased. Advocates and policymakers across the country have offered a number of creative solutions to make sure people have access to food, in addition to financial support and transportation assistance.

### MOWER COUNTY FOOD DESERTS

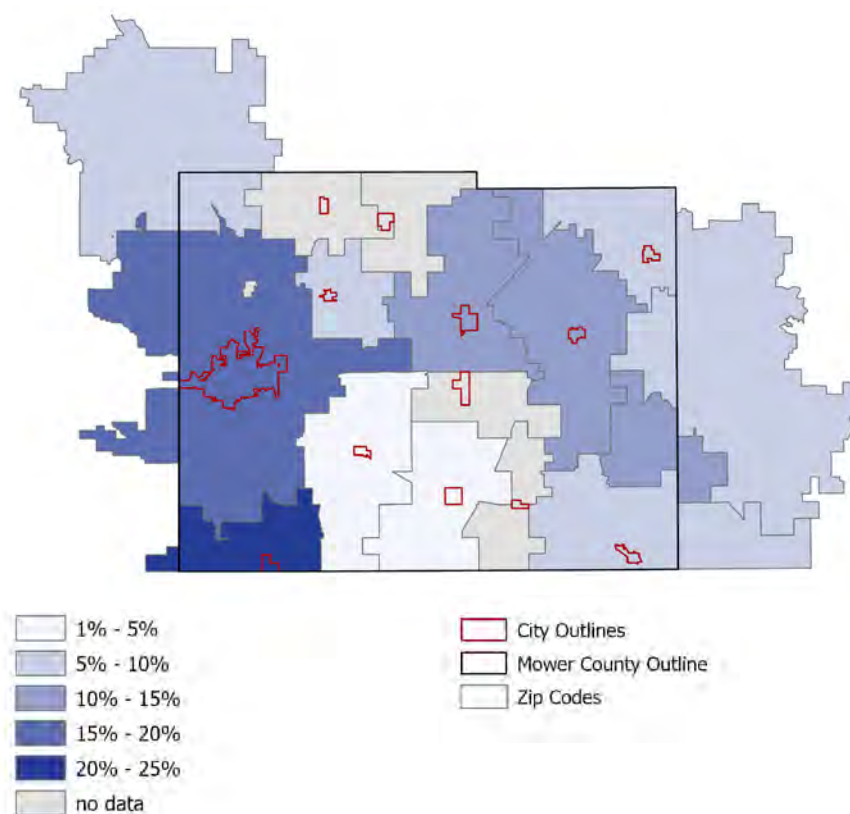


For example, some legislators have suggested changes to zoning laws that would make it easier for farmers' markets and mobile food vendors to do business in underserved areas. Other suggestions involve programs that would incentivize convenience stores to stock healthy items, subsidies for nutrition literacy programs, and even laws to regulate the minimum distance that fast-food restaurants

could be from schools and playgrounds.<sup>42</sup>

While closing the food desert gap is essential to ensuring equitable food access across the county, studies have shown that there is not a direct correlation between food-store locations and food insecurity rates. Therefore, these policy suggestions aren't likely to have any impact on reducing hunger.

#### POVERTY RATE BY ZIP CODE





## At the Intersection of Health and Food Security

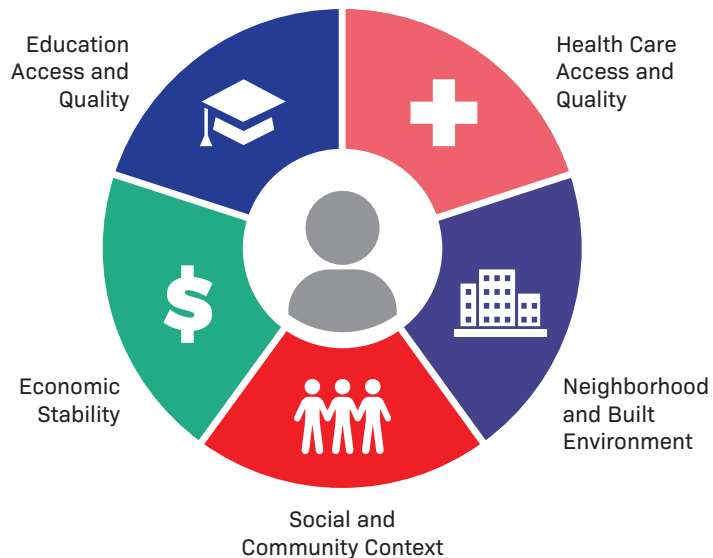
Poor diets and lack of access to nutritious foods often have severe health consequences. The adult obesity rate in Minnesota is over 30%, increasing the risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. Obesity is also associated with poor overall physical and mental health.<sup>43</sup> Those with incomes under \$35,000 are significantly more likely to suffer from type 2 diabetes.<sup>44</sup>

Studies show that improvements in food security are associated with improved health outcomes, concluding that SNAP substantially reduces the prevalence of food insecurity and thus is critical to reducing negative health outcomes.<sup>45</sup>

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the social determinants of health are 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. As discussed throughout the report, food insecurity is a multifaceted issue, with close ties to these determinants, including economic stability, education, race and ethnicity and healthcare access, among others.

Improving food security will have wide-ranging health benefits over the long term – for both individuals and the community.

### SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH



In Southeast Minnesota, the **Mayo Clinic Health System (MCHS)** hospitals are located in Albert Lea, Austin, Cannon Falls, Lake City and Red Wing and there are regional clinics throughout the region. MCHS partners with community stakeholders – including Mower County – to conduct regional Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA). A CHNA is a data-driven report developed in close partnership with local stakeholders to identify the most pressing health

needs in local communities. In 2022, Mayo Clinic released the **CHNA for Albert Lea and Austin**. The top three identified health needs are: 1) mental health and well-being, 2) access to care; and 3) chronic disease prevention. While food insecurity was not listed in the top three priority areas, the report notes that efforts will be addressed as a community health need working alongside local partners to address hunger in the community.

*“Every community is different in terms of how food impacts health. In my job I’m seeing a lot of people with heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity even among children and teens. We try to manage their conditions through nutritional education but often cost or lack of access to healthy foods is a barrier.”*

–Faro Jones, Registered Dietitian, Mayo Clinic.



"As Margaret Wheatley once said, 'there is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about,' and we have done just that through our Hometown Food Security Project. It's clear that local leaders care deeply for the people of Mower County, believe firmly that basic needs should be met, and acknowledge their role in food security efforts wholeheartedly. I'm honored to lead United Way of Mower County and our Hometown Food Security Project because I'm inspired by these leaders every day. They are our boots on the ground, experts in the field, and the reason this effort will be transformational for the Mower County community."

—Molly Lanke, Executive Director, United Way of Mower County



# Food Insecurity Across Key Constituencies - A Deep Dive

## Children & Infants

### Childhood Hunger: A National Problem

In 2021, more than 9 million children in America faced food insecurity. That's 1 in 8 children, or 12.5%, who were not sure if they would have access to their next meal. Data collected by the Urban Institute shows that homes with children are, in fact, more likely to experience food insecurity than households that contain only adults.<sup>1</sup>

America's food-insecure children are not evenly distributed across the country's population even when income is taken into account. National USDA data reveals that Black and Latino children were far more likely to be food insecure in 2021, with 22% of Black children and 18.5% of Latino children facing hunger. Single-mother households were also disproportionately affected, with 24% of these families at risk for hunger.<sup>2</sup> Immigrant families – like those who make up a growing part of Mower County's population – often face their own food security challenges, as their eligibility for state or federal aid may be restricted.

The negative effects of food insecurity on children are various and often long-lasting. Studies have shown that children in food-insecure households are more likely to develop chronic conditions such as anemia and asthma and are hospitalized at higher rates. Researchers have also drawn a connection between childhood hunger and academic difficulties, including attention problems, developmental impairments (mental and physical), and social/behavioral issues.<sup>3</sup>

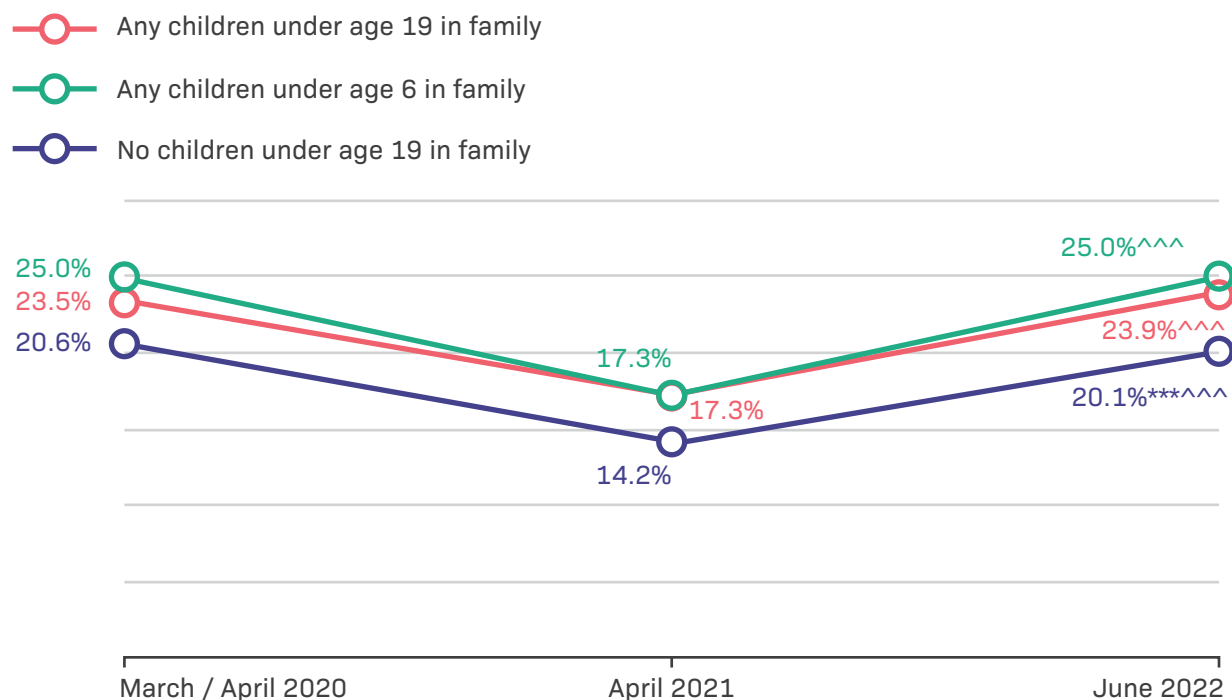
While there are programs in place to combat childhood food insecurity at the national and local levels, these programs are often inadequately funded and do not reach everyone in need. For example, SNAP benefits remain an important tool in the fight against hunger, helping feed 17 million children in 2018.<sup>4</sup> These benefits are not designed to meet all the nutritional needs of families. For 2019, the Children's Defense Fund calculated that, among households with children, the benefits covered approximately

at least one meal per person per day<sup>5</sup>. As the name of the program indicates, SNAP is designed to provide supplemental help in addition to family income.

On a similar note, the Child Tax Credits, implemented as part of President Biden's American Rescue Plan in July 2021, played a significant role in reducing child hunger during the six months the program was in place. From July through December of that year, 92% of American households received up to \$3,600 per year for each child in the home. *U.S. News* reports that these benefits reduced food insufficiency by 26%.<sup>6</sup> When the program expired at the start of 2022, food insufficiency quickly returned to its previous levels, increasing by 25%.<sup>7</sup>

Schools continue to play a crucial role in fighting child hunger. The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program serve billions of free or reduced price meals every year.<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education statistics show that nearly half of

## SHARE OF ADULTS REPORTING HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN THE LAST 30 DAYS BY PRESENCE OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY



### Food Insufficiency

The food insufficiency question provides relatively little detail on the food hardship experienced and indicates only whether a household had enough to eat. Food insufficiency is a more severe condition than food insecurity and measures whether a household generally has enough to eat. In this way, food insufficiency is closer in severity to very low food security than to overall food insecurity.

Source: USDA

public school students rely on these programs to meet their daily dietary needs.<sup>9</sup> According to USDA data from 2019, schools served 21.8 million free or reduced-price lunches every day, along with 12.54 million free or reduced-price breakfasts.<sup>10</sup> While participation continues to grow, the gap between the number of students who receive lunch and those who receive breakfast suggests an opportunity to increase food access.

When schools closed at the height of the COVID-19 Pandemic, tens of millions of children were left without their only secure source of food. While many schools tried to implement support programs, these were no substitute for daily, in-person cafeteria access. Even under pre-pandemic conditions, eve-

nings, weekends, and summer breaks often leave many students without their most reliable means of accessing nutrition.<sup>11</sup>

COVID-19's effects on child hunger went beyond school closures. With businesses closing and workers being laid off, many families found themselves experiencing food insecurity for the first time. Economic indicators for 2023 show that Minnesota economic recovery from Covid lags the nation at large.<sup>12</sup> Add inflation to the mix (at-home food prices rose by 13% in 2022<sup>13</sup>) and food security support systems have only become more important.

## Childhood Hunger in Mower County

Rates of childhood food insecurity in Mower County resemble national statistics. In 2021, an estimated 1,510 Mower County children experienced hunger. That's 1 in 7 kids, or 15.2% of the youth population, compared with 1 in 10 adults, and slightly higher than the Minnesota and national rates.<sup>14</sup>

The racial disparities that exist at the national level are also present in Mower County: 1 in 5 Black children faced hunger in 2021, along with 1 in 6 Latino children and 1 in 4 Native American children.

National support programs play an important role in combating childhood food insecurity in Mower County, but numerous local initiatives and community

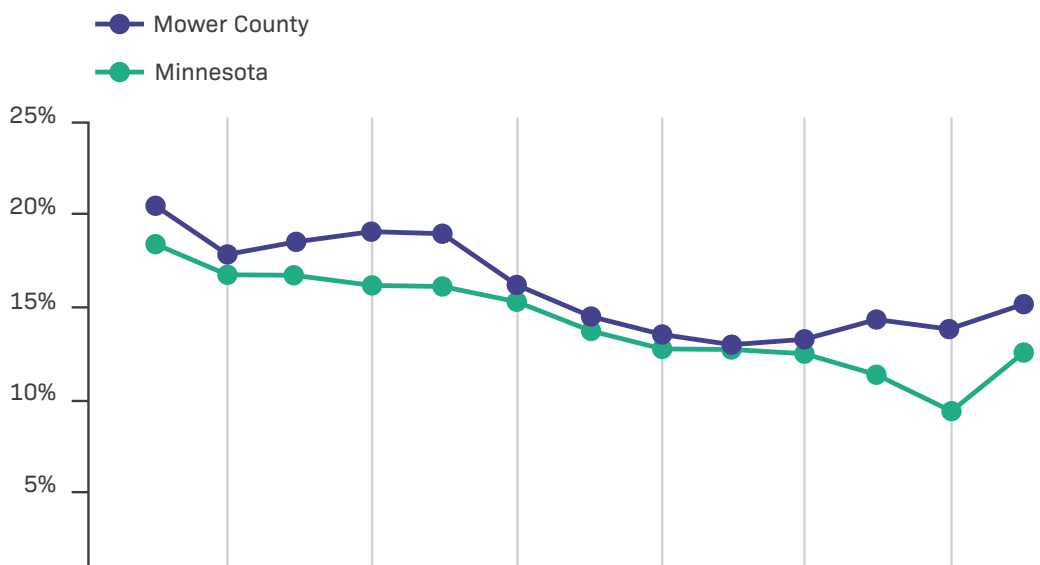
organizations have emerged as vital parts of the system. Among the largest of these local programs is the Mower County Backpack Program coordinated by the county's United Way chapter. This donation-based initiative operates in conjunction with various school districts within Mower County, sending more than 500 students home with backpacks full of food on weekends, helping to ensure that they have access to regular meals even when they are away from school. The organization gives families the option to extend the support through summer break.<sup>15</sup>

"Learning and development are adversely affected by a lack of good nutrition, particularly in the first three years of life. We know that later on when kids start elementary school there can be behavior problems and learning difficulties if kids are missing meals. Furthermore, if kids aren't getting the right kinds of calories and a balanced diet, it can lead to iron deficiency which can cause kids to have difficulty sleeping and therefore difficulty learning."

—Sarah Scherger, Pediatrician at  
Mayo Clinic Health System, Austin

### AVERAGE CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY - MOWER COUNTY VS. MINNESOTA

AVERAGE CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY: MOWER COUNTY VS MINNESOTA



## Local Schools

Mary Weikum, director of Food and Nutrition Services at Austin Public Schools, reports that nearly 70% of students in the district are currently eligible for free and reduced lunch. Twenty years ago, this figure was around 30%. The drastic increase in numbers is attributed mainly to changes in the application system to accommodate more people. It is now online-based, and made available in multiple languages, among other factors.

While she would like to see even more students benefit, Weikum acknowledges there are many factors that make full participation unlikely. One of these, she says, is menu preference. She notes that current state guidelines limit the content of the meals the school can offer. Weikum would prefer that students be offered fresher and more protein-rich breakfasts that would be more sustaining than the carbohydrate-heavy offerings required by state regulations. Weikum also notes that there is typically a decline in participation once Austin students reach high school, as they are allowed to leave campus at lunchtime. Additional reasons for not participating in these programs included stigma, pride, reluctance or inability to fill out paperwork, and apprehension that utilizing the program could jeopardize citi-

zenship processes. More flexibility with meal choices for students would also reduce food waste, which has been noted as an issue among schools in the district.

In order to qualify for free and reduced lunch in Austin Public Schools, a single parent with one child must gross less than \$2,824 per month.<sup>16</sup> As Weikum points out, there are a number of students whose families make just above these limits, and still have difficulty affording daily school lunches. In some cases the margin between eligibility and ineligibility has been as low as \$11. To address this challenge, Weikum introduced the **Lunch Tray Project**.

The Minnesota Department of Education administers the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), where kids ages 1–18 can receive a free meal regardless of their free and reduced eligibility.

In March 2023, Minnesota passed a law to provide free lunch and breakfast to all Minnesota students, independently of income limits set by federal programs. This is an important milestone welcomed by community advocates, with the potential to have a profound impact for many children facing food insecurity.

*“If you’re a little kid who maybe didn’t have dinner last night and you missed breakfast, how are you going to learn? It not only impacts their education but also their behavior. We have found that kids who eat breakfast have less behavior problems which then makes the whole class learn better because the disruptions are not there. It makes everyone’s day better.”*

–Mary Weikum, Director of Food and Nutrition Services, Austin Public Schools



### The Lunch Tray Project

solicits community donations to fund the lunch accounts of students whose applications were denied by less than \$450 – the average cost of a year of school lunches. Hormel Foods and other local businesses have been among the largest contributors to this innovative program. The Lunch Tray Project helped support 85 students, and has become a model for similar programs in neighboring districts.

## FREE & REDUCED LUNCH STATISTICS - MOWER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Public School Districts	Students	Free Lunch	Reduced-Price Lunch	% Eligible for Lunch Benefits
Austin	5182	2138	493	51%
Grand Meadow	466	62	10	15%
Leroy-Ostrander	250	39	9	19%
Southland	410	59	41	24%
Lyle	306	126	42	55%
Southern Minnesota Education Consortium	102	26	11	36%
<b>Total</b>	<b>6716</b>	<b>2450</b>	<b>606</b>	<b>46% (3,506)</b>



## Seniors and Older Adults

### Senior Food Insecurity in the U.S.

Food insecurity is a significant issue among seniors in the U.S. In 2020, 6.8% of all adults aged 60+ in the United States were food insecure (5.2 million seniors) according to Feeding America,<sup>17</sup> and studies have shown that it is disproportionately affecting those facing chronic health conditions, living alone, or those with low income.

Adequate nutrition is essential for health, especially among older populations who are more at risk for a variety of severe health conditions, such as cancer, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes. Complicating things further, chronic illness is both a risk factor for and a consequence of food insecurity among seniors. One study showed seniors with two or more chronic health conditions, such as congestive heart failure and asthma, over twice likely to face food insecurity than those with zero or one chronic health conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Illness can limit employment opportunities and quickly diminish savings accounts. Some health issues, such as diabetes, require specific diets that are often more expensive and difficult to procure than a standard diet. This can spark a negative feedback loop. Inadequate nutrition can exacerbate chronic health conditions causing more financial strain and increased food insecurity.<sup>19</sup>

For the older population, especially in rural communities, the inability to drive, either because of disability or financial hardship, can create food-access challenges. While two-thirds of U.S. adults are still driving at age 70, that number drops off at age 85, where most are no longer driving.<sup>20</sup> If they are no longer able to drive, seniors still living at home may have to turn to their social networks or public transportation to access food. Ice, snow and cold during winter months in Mower County can be an additional barrier to movement of our older population.

One potential answer to seniors facing transportation issues are meal delivery services. The Home-Delivered Nutrition Services program, part of the Older Americans Act, provides meals and related nutrition services for older individuals nationwide. Many participants in the program are close to the age where driving begins to drop off: 57% of participants in the program are 75 years or older, compared to 30% (in 2020) of the U.S. population over 60 years old. The program hasn't just helped improve seniors' access to food, but has helped alleviate malnutrition in the older population as well – 76% of participants reported that they eat healthier because of the program.<sup>21</sup>

Nancy Donahue, senior advocate at the Mower County Senior Center, recently suggested that

"The price of groceries has increased and I definitely see seniors who have outlived their money. I am not so concerned about the people I work with. It's the people we don't work with that concern me. I recently worked with a homeless man who's been homeless for several years. He uses my address here at the senior center as his mailing address. I asked him if he ever goes over to the Salvation Army for their evening meals. He said: Well I don't go very often. I leave it for the people that really need it. So everybody has a different concept of what they need, what they want and what they deserve."

—Nancy Donahue, Senior Advocate,  
Mower County Senior Center

enhanced meal delivery would make a significant difference in the community. The Mower County Senior Center receives commodity food boxes from Channel One Food Bank that are distributed to area seniors who qualify. But due to a lack of resources, they're unable to deliver all of them to seniors at home. Instead, many seniors must drive or find a ride to the Senior Center, where the boxes are then loaded into their car for them. Meal delivery would alleviate the need not just for seniors to drive to the facility, but also the difficulty of getting the boxes inside their homes. "It's not just the transportation, but it's the fact that those boxes are 35 pounds," said Donahue.

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POPULATION OF MOWER COUNTY  
THAT IS 60 YEARS OLD OR OLDER

**24.3%**



### **An Unexpected Case: Food Insecurity among 50-59 Year-Olds**

Despite the growing focus on ensuring adults 60+ become food secure, there are other segments of adults that are experiencing food insecurity at increasing rates and face unique challenges in becoming food secure.

In 2020, 10.4% of U.S. adults aged 50-59 were food insecure, an uptick from 9.5% in 2019, and higher than the national rate of adults aged 60+. This isn't an anomaly; over time, age and food security have proven to have an inverse relationship. One reason for this is that adults aged 50-59 often don't qualify for most assistance programs and subsidies that are available for seniors. Many of the risk factors for senior adults are reflected in the 50-59 demographic, such as living with a disability and living alone. In 2020, 26.4% of adults aged 50-59 with disabilities faced food insecurity, more than three times the national average.<sup>22</sup> Single older adults were food insecure at a rate twice as high as those who were married.

### **Senior Hunger in Mower County**

An estimated 24.3% (9,727 individuals) of Mower County citizens are aged 60+. Of the 5,928 households of 60+ aged residents, 38.9% reported living

alone<sup>23</sup>, significantly higher than the national average of 27.7%. According to ACS 2021 data, of households that received food stamps in Mower County, 27.2% of households had a resident over the age of 60, lower than the national average of 36.5%. Of residents in Mower County aged 65+ (7,004 individuals), 33.3% have at least one disability, which approximates the national average of 34.9%.

- Seniors in the county often live alone, sometimes in isolated, rural homes. Many are affected by loneliness due to lack of social interaction. In some cases, they lack the support network needed to access healthy food options, or might be limited in their ability to cook and prepare meals. NIH studies have found that, for seniors in rural areas, loneliness, food insecurity and poor health can be "cyclically connected," negatively affecting each other.<sup>24</sup>

While the most common mode of transportation in Mower County is a personal vehicle, there are public options available around Austin, including to and from grocery stores, plus several options for meal delivery.

- The Southern Minnesota Rural Area Transportation (SMART) offers on-demand transportation for older adults to area grocery stores, along with two regularly scheduled routes in Austin.<sup>25</sup> For \$30/month, they can have unlimited rides.

- The Mower County Senior Center also offers transportation to qualified residents.<sup>26</sup> For those preferring to receive food and meals at home, Austin residents have several options. Meal delivery programs include Meals on Wheels, which services 7 locales in Mower County,<sup>27</sup> and helped other programs become more mobile during the pandemic. In 2021, Semcac was forced to adapt their operations; Normally, Semcac's senior dining options were in-person at congregate senior dining locations. With the onset of COVID-19, however, Semcac, with the help of Meals on Wheels, mobilized to offer meal delivery services for seniors. They were able to serve 61,565 nutritious meals to 1,147 Mower County seniors.<sup>28</sup>

In 2021, the Mayo Clinic Health System launched a mobile health clinic with the goal to bring Mayo Clinic care closer to patients in rural areas in southern Minnesota. The mobile clinics now serve the communities of Blooming Prairie, Butterfield, Kenyon and Sherburn, all in the vicinity of Mower County,<sup>29</sup> with opportunities for expansion. Among the services provided, the mobile clinic offers chronic disease checks, medication refills and checks, pediatrics, preventive services and wellness visits—all interlinked with the issue of food insecurity.

SENIORS LIVING ALONE IN  
MOWER COUNTY

**38.9%**

SENIORS WHO REPORT LIVING WITH  
AT LEAST ONE DISABILITY

**33.3%**



# Immigrants & Migrants

## Immigrant Hunger: A Nationwide Issue

Every day, a significant portion of the nearly 85 million immigrants in the U.S. face the challenge of figuring out how they're going to get their next meal. That's because immigrant households on average experience food insecurity at a rate of 1.53% higher than non-immigrant households. However, that number doesn't tell the full story, as different immigrant populations experience food insecurity at different rates. Chinese and Indian immigrant groups actually experience food security at a higher rate than the native population (5.98% and 2.51% higher, respectively)<sup>1</sup>, bolstering the combined average of food security amongst immigrants. Other immigrant popula-

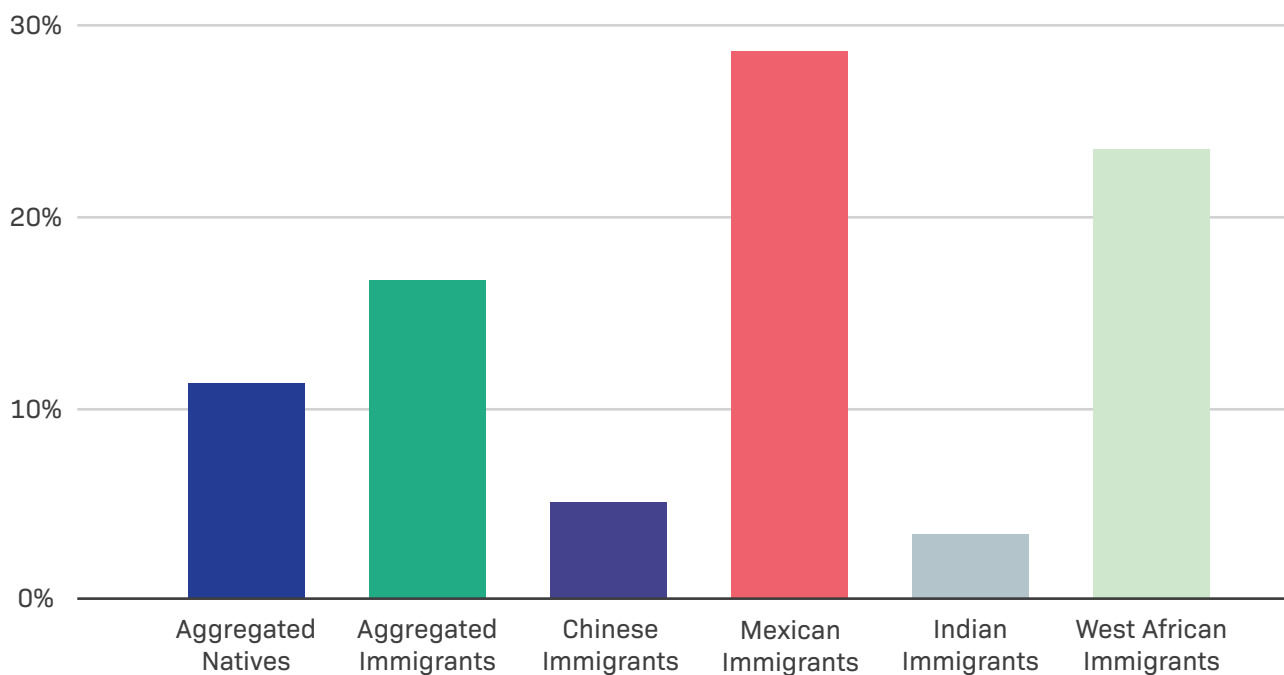
tions, such as those from Mexico and West Africa, see decreases, 3.53% and 7.59% respectively, in the likelihood of experiencing household food security.<sup>30</sup>

Most immigrants are eligible for national programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), but the challenge isn't necessarily just making programs available – it's getting immigrants to participate in the existing ones. Some immigrants come from cultures where receiving food subsidies may be seen as dishonorable.<sup>31</sup> Others may be afraid that participating in such programs can affect their citizenship; 1 in 7 eligible adults (13.6%)

in immigrant families don't participate in food or housing subsidies for fear that it may affect their legalization efforts.<sup>32</sup> Others may find determining their eligibility for subsidy programs to be difficult due to stringent and ever-changing requirements.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, some may underreport food insecurity issues on the CPS Survey, leading to rates that are lower than actual experiences.

For undocumented immigrants, the chance of facing food insecurity is even greater. Based on a 2016 study, undocumented immigrants are almost twice as likely to experience food insecurity as the rest of the population.<sup>34</sup>

### RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG IMMIGRANTS NATIONALLY



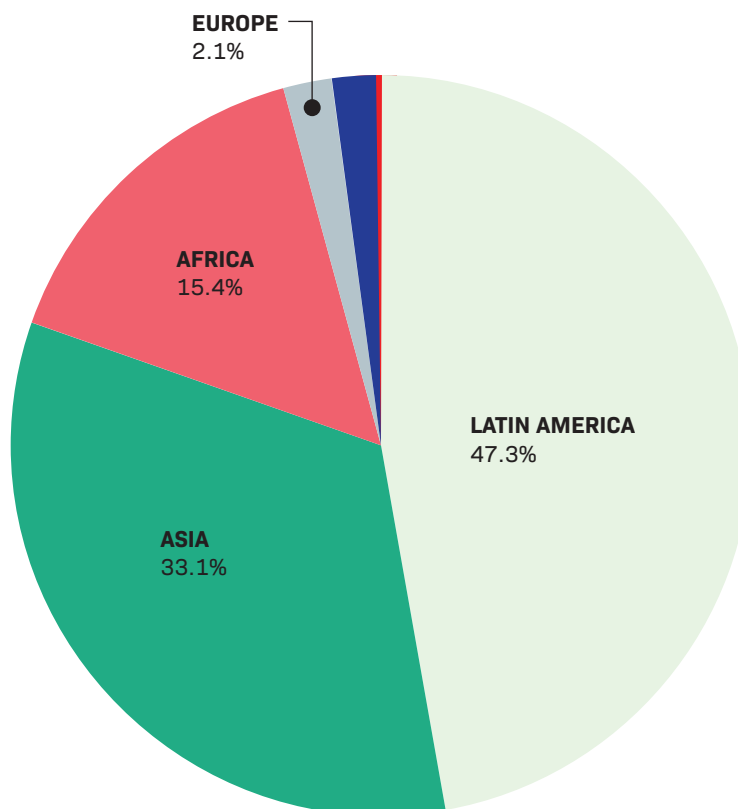
Immigrant populations are also at risk of food insecurity due to employment demographics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrant communities were some of the hardest hit populations due to a high rate of employment in the “gig economy.”<sup>35</sup> Instability of these jobs can lead to episodic bouts of hunger. In farming communities, which employ high rates of migrant workers, immigrants face similar barriers to food access. Increasing costs of food in rural towns and fewer local grocery stores means many immigrants in those communities find themselves food insecure.<sup>36</sup>


### Immigrant Hunger in Mower County

The plentiful jobs available in Mower County’s farming and industry sectors are a magnet for immigrants from around the world. These jobs are seen as the first step to building a more prosperous life for themselves and their families. Our community is the destination for diasporas from Asia, Central and South America, and Africa. Speaking over 100 languages, these populations bring us cultural diversity and are the foundational labor force for our national food supply.

From 2017-2021, individuals born in another country made up 10.9% of Mower County’s population (appx. 4,377 individuals).<sup>37</sup> Of the 10.9% foreign-born population, the majority are made up of immigrants of Latin American and Asian origin.<sup>38</sup> According to 2021 ACS data, 3,327 of these residents speak English “less than very well,” highlighting a need for hunger resources in multiple languages that align with immigrant demographics.

**MOWER COUNTY IMMIGRANT POPULATION - AREA OF ORIGIN**





Based on varying studies of immigrant food insecurity being anywhere from 30-60%, that puts the estimate of food insecure immigrants in Mower County at 1,300-2,600 individuals. Studies indicate that about 1 in 7 of those will not avail themselves of aid they qualify for for fear it will affect their legalization efforts.

In addition to SNAP and other federal programs, there are several state-level programs in place to help increase immigrant access to food. The Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) ensures that refugee families with children can receive cash and food assistance, and Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES), Minnesota's largest Latino-led nonprofit organization, helps ensure economic advancement opportunities for Latinos in the state.

Some of the food security barriers immigrants face are rooted in culture. Food plays an important

role in cultures across the world – religiously, ritually, and in day-to-day life – that can make adapting to a Western lifestyle and diet difficult. Immigrants may have different food practices, religious restrictions, traditions, and views of foods versus non-foods that make access to preferred options difficult.<sup>39</sup> There is still a long way to go on the road to incorporating culturally relevant foods into Western diets.

The Mower County Food Security Assessment Community Forums on November 3 and 5, organized by this coalition, offered several cultural and behavioral takeaways to help address food security issues among immigrant populations:

#### Somali and North African

- Separating meats is helpful to respect their religious beliefs.
- Often face scrutiny or negative attention when wearing traditional Muslim clothing.
- Muslim restrictions, animal slaughtering practices on pork and pork by-products and other taboos can limit choices.

#### Southeast Asian

- Fish is a common food staple but often more expensive than other sources of protein.
- Some populations don't traditionally use canned fruits or vegetables.
- Lack of certified interpreters for some Micronesian languages can make communication efforts difficult given the large population in the county.

#### Latin America

- Prefer fresh food (and may not have refrigerators at home).
- Shifting federal policies regarding paths toward citizenship creates fear within the community. Many avoid food shelves or food assistance programs for fear that participation will disrupt their residency or citizenship status.

“For the immigrant populations that we work with it is important to build a relationship of trust. Some of these resources will be new to them and they may have come from places where they didn't trust local authorities. Oftentimes it is helpful to have a relative or someone from their community to explain what is available and how we can support them and their families.”

–Rain Prehsoeklwee, Community Health Worker, Mower County HHS

# Mental Health and Physical Disability



## Disability and Food Insecurity

In 2020, disabled adults were twice as likely to face food insecurity as non-disabled adults.<sup>40</sup> While this figure increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, disability and hunger have long had a well-documented relationship.

Disability is one example of what researchers refer to as a “social determinant of health,” or an economic or social factor that influences the health outcomes of a group or individual. Other examples are climate change, race, economic policy, and social norms. The CDC defines disability as “any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them.”<sup>41</sup>

There are many reasons that connect disability and food insecurity. Disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than non-disabled individuals. Those who do find employment earn 87 cents on the dollar compared with other workers.<sup>42</sup> People with disabilities are also more likely to lack access to reliable transportation, making it harder for them to go grocery shopping or visit food shelves. This issue of transportation is especially important in rural communities where the distance between stores is larger than in urban settings.

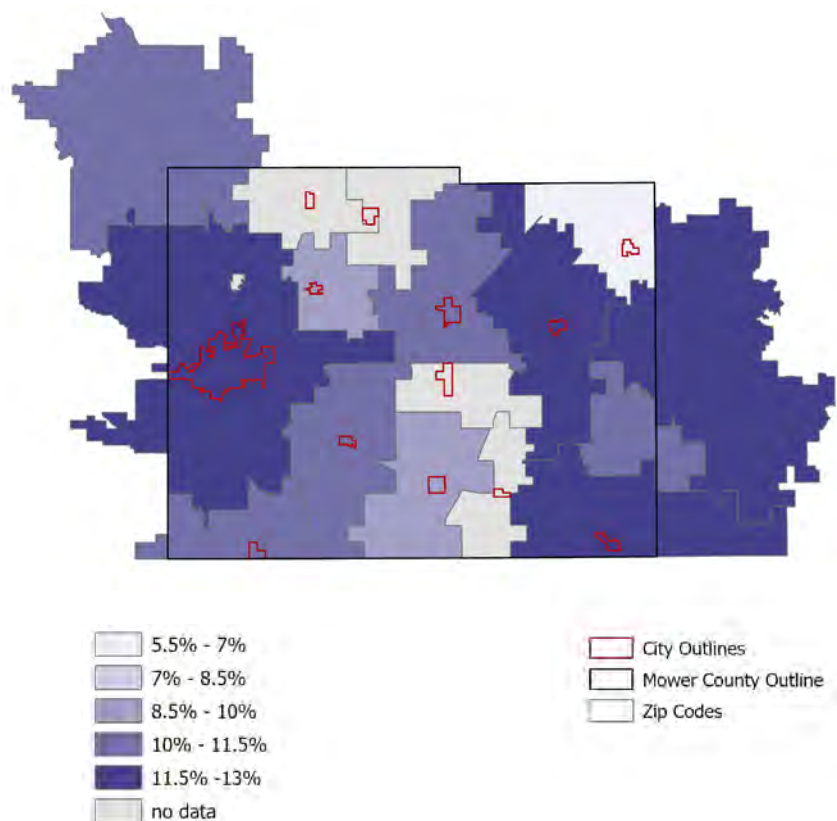
Food insecurity and disability – physical and mental – often exacerbating the other. The CDC states that adults who experience food insecurity are two to three

times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes than food-secure adults.<sup>43</sup> The CDC believes that this is because food-insecure individuals will often have diets that are high in processed sugars and saturated fats, as these foods are often more affordable or accessible than more nutritious options. As a chronic condition, diabetes requires patients to manage their diets to a greater extent than normal, both in terms of what and how frequently they should eat. As with our elderly population, this can create a downward spiral in which a person’s disease will

cost them extra money that they may not have, resulting in greater food insecurity, depriving them of the nutrition they need to effectively manage their diabetes.

Researchers have noted a similar pattern can occur with mental disability, positing that inadequate access to food can contribute to psychological distress and severe mental health problems, which in turn can make it harder for an individual to maintain a job or engage with support systems, initiating a similar negative feedback loop.<sup>44</sup>

## MOWER COUNTY DISABILITY RATE





## Mental Health and Physical Disability (cont.)

### COVID-19

Data from the Census Bureau's COVID-19 Household Pulse Survey from March 2021 found that 55.7% of disabled Medicare recipients under the age of 65 either did not have enough food or were unable to access the food they wanted.<sup>45</sup> While disability has always been a risk factor for food insecurity, the pandemic presented disabled individuals with a number of new challenges. While unemployment (and the threat of food insecurity) rose across the board, the increase in jobless claims was even greater for disabled adults. During a time when the overall unemployment rate rose to 7.9%, the rate was 12.6% for people with disabilities.<sup>46</sup> Disabled people are also at a higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19, meaning that grocery shopping became a potentially life-threatening experience. And when public transportation began to shut down, many disabled people found themselves without reliable access to food.

### National Programs

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USDA took steps to expand SNAP and other federal programs. One pilot program allowed SNAP recipients to buy food online for the first time, though advocates point out that nearly 30% of households with a disabled person report no internet use in the home.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the online programs became a widespread and important tool for disabled people to secure adequate nutrition while mitigating the risk of in-person shopping. In March 2020, only five states had systems in place for online food assistance. A little more than a year later, it was standard practice in 47 states.<sup>48</sup> The federal government also allocated more funds for community-based independent living programs, many of which involve helping disabled people secure transportation to grocery stores, or in some cases offer home delivery options.

Activists point out that while programs like this are important, they are not a perfect solution to the problem of food insecurity among disabled individuals. Many disabled people who rely on food assistance live month to month, with few programs offering quantities of food that would allow recipients to stockpile in preparation for disasters like a pandemic. Another concern is that the programs do not always meet the dietary needs of disabled individuals. Many see existing support systems as short-term remedies that fail to address the fundamental problems that cause disabled individuals to experience food insecurity at such high rates.



## Mower County

Mower County works closely with the state of Minnesota to implement a number of community based waiver services that offer local support for disabled and elderly people. These programs include services for people with developmental disabilities, a family support grant for families with disabled children, and personal care assistance that helps people engage with their communities with higher levels of independence.

Mower County also participates in the state's Community Access for Disability Inclusion Waiver that gives eligible recipients access to services such as employment support, professional development, home delivered meals and transportation. The state reports that during the fiscal year 2020, "an average of 29,493 Minnesotans were served on the CADI waiver each month at an average monthly cost of \$3,638 each in state and federal funds."<sup>49</sup>

There are a number of institutions across the county aimed at providing a safe, supportive and caring environment for individuals with mental health conditions and/or disabilities. They offer a range of services including education, rehabilitation, medical care and nutrition. Among them, it's worth noting the Nexus Gerard Family Healing center, which provides outpatient and community mental health services and residential treatment to help children suffering from emotional, behavioral and mental health issues.



## Veterans

### Veterans and Food Insecurity

Across the United States, military veterans find themselves at greater risk for food insecurity than the general population. Feeding America reports that 1 in 9 working-age veterans live in a food insecure household. Even more striking is that 24% of active duty service members were food insecure in 2020. The organization goes on to report that 1.2 million veterans rely on SNAP benefits to meet their basic nutrition needs.<sup>50</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, veterans are 7.4% more likely to experience food insecurity than non-veterans.<sup>51</sup>

One factor that contributes to the heightened prevalence of food insecurity among military veterans are the increased rates of physical and mental disability. Furthermore, veterans may face unique challenges as they reintegrate into civilian life upon returning from their service, including undergoing a move and finding employment.

### Veterans in Mower County

According to the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, there were 2,425 veterans in Mower County in 2022.<sup>52</sup> In an effort to support this population, the Mower County Veterans Services Office works closely with federal and state agencies to provide a range of services and benefits, including nutrition assistance. Statewide organizations such as the Minnesota Military & Veteran Exchange, Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, and the Military Family Assistance Centers provide local assistance for veterans and their families. In addition to providing direct food access, these efforts often focus on helping veterans – particularly those in rural areas – secure stable employment and achieve financial independence.

One unique challenge facing Mower County veterans is that the nearest VA Medical Center is located in Minneapolis. While the Mower County Veterans Service Office provides transportation,

the round trip between Austin and Minneapolis is still 200 miles. VA medical centers typically play an important role in supporting food-insecure veterans, with providers being trained to screen veterans for issues related to food and hunger. If necessary, hospital workers are equipped to direct patients to local, veteran-specific resources. In some cases, VA medical centers have a food pantry on campus.



## Hormel Foods and Veterans

As one of the largest employers in Mower County, Hormel Foods plays a role in supporting local veterans. The Hormel Military Veterans Engagement Team (HMVET) is a volunteer group devoted to recruiting, supporting and retaining veterans and active-duty military personnel for jobs with Hormel Foods. The organization seeks to offer veterans opportunities to support themselves and their families with their military skills, while helping them integrate into the Hormel community. HMVET has organized holiday food drives for Minnesota veterans and their families, delivering care packages of Hormel products. Navy Veteran Rashad Hunt says “Hormel was really instrumental in providing a bridge between civilian and military life.”<sup>53</sup>

Thanks to efforts like these, Hormel Foods has received recognition from numerous national and local organizations, including seven consecutive spots

on the Military Times Best for Vets employers list. In 2017, the company was named a Beyond the Yellow Ribbon company for its work in recruiting and retaining veteran employees, giving them the tools and support they need to achieve financial independence and maintain reliable access to food. Hormel Foods has also been recognized by the Minnesota Department of Military Affairs and the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

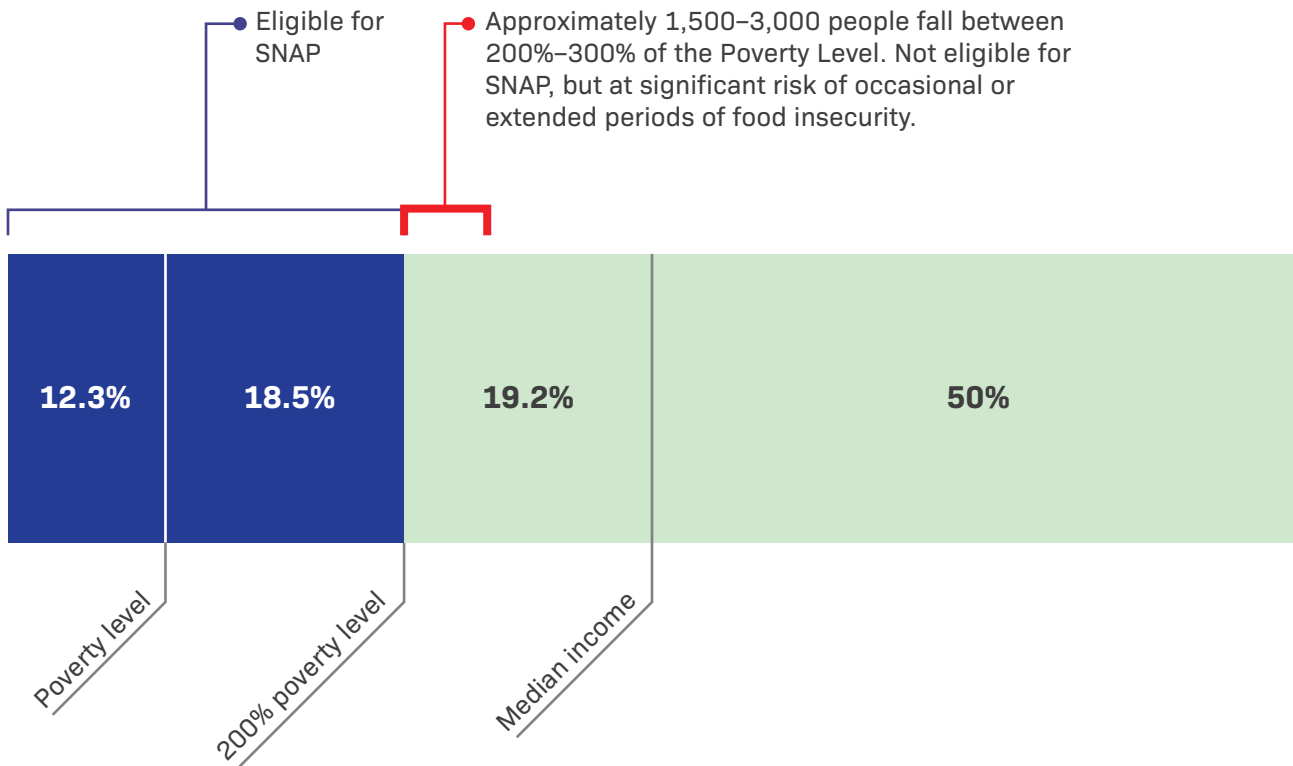
## Just Beyond the Thresholds

Nearly 31% of Mower County falls under 200% of the poverty level and are therefore eligible for SNAP. Yet, hunger doesn't end there.

Those who fall between between 200% and 250%, or even 300%, of the Poverty Level are at a high risk of food insecurity, especially temporarily, given that their income is so close to the cost of living – and they aren't eligible for SNAP. In their case, any unexpected expense, like a family illness or job loss, may dig into their food budget.

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### MOWER COUNTY POPULATION BY POVERTY LEVEL





## Thinking About Three Mower County Families, and their Budgets

Using the Minnesota Cost of Living Study, we've estimated basic living-needs for three types of families in Mower County. Each has their own situation, with varying configurations, expenses, income, and benefit access.

It is important to note – these are not necessarily families at high risk of food insecurity. However, when working to understand hunger, it helps to look beyond aggregate food insecurity rates, asset maps and SNAP details

– and think about the individuals and families who could be affected, even if not expected. These cases are included to help us put ourselves in the shoes of someone else, to better understand their daily life and potential challenges.



### Family #1

Consider the case of a single mother with two children, ages 3 and 8, working a full-time job **earning \$46,060, or \$23/hour**. They are at 200% of the Federal Poverty Guide threshold, just beyond SNAP eligibility. Given Earned Income and Childcare Credits, we estimate their taxes as neutral. Monthly expenses of \$3,838 include:

- Healthcare: If her employer doesn't cover healthcare, they qualify for MinnesotaCare which has reduced premiums of \$28 per person through December 2025 (originally \$80), totaling \$84/month.
- Childcare \$872: This includes a daycare program, and occasional babysitters.
- Housing \$1,134: Rents a two-bedroom home in Austin, with a monthly payment of \$950. Utility and maintenance costs an additional \$184 per month. They do their best to save money on their energy, heating and water bill, and the kids share a room.
- Transport \$698: Includes fixed annual costs of owning a car as well as gas and maintenance. The single mother needs a car to get to work, get groceries, take the children to school and day care, and for other personal business.
- Food \$802: Maintains a healthy supply of groceries in her household.
- Other \$248: Everything else.



## Family #2

Two adults working full time with two children in grade school, plus one senior, with an **annual income of \$71,602** (200% of Poverty Level). These parents both work full-time while supporting a grandparent in this three-generation household. After taxes, income would approximate \$65,000.

- Healthcare \$649-\$549, plus \$100 for the senior, who qualifies for medicare and MinnesotaCare.
- Childcare \$240: Between babysitting, after school programs, and other childcare the total monthly cost is \$240 without daycare.
- Housing \$1,520: Owns a three-bedroom home in Austin – children share a bedroom – with monthly mortgage, insurance and utility payments.
- Transport \$942: The family owns two cars, each for getting to work, dropping kids off at school and other necessary uses. Transport expenses consist of car payments, car maintenance and gas.
- Food \$1427: Maintains a consistent stock of groceries in the household.
- Other \$688: Everything else.



## Family #3

Two adults, one working full time and one at home with a child. **Annual Income of \$23,030** (at Poverty Level). They receive SNAP benefits of \$421 per month, and the Earned Income Tax Credit of \$3,995, for an effective income of \$32,077.

- Healthcare (standard of living calculator: \$538, with MinnesotaCare: \$0): Qualifies for MN Medicaid for three-person family (under 133% of FPG). Does not require a monthly premium, MA members have small co-pays for some services, usually \$1-\$3.<sup>54</sup>
- Childcare \$0: One stay at home parent, so there is always full-time care for the child. He/she stays with a relative for occasional nights out.
- Housing \$795: Rents a small two-bedroom apartment in Austin. Between utilities and rent the costs total \$795.
- Transport \$561: The family owns one car, mostly used for getting to work, dropping kids off at school and other necessities. The car is used often, requiring consistent maintenance. Expenses consist of car payments, car maintenance and gas.
- Food \$811: Maintains a healthy stock of groceries in the household. Qualifies for SNAP benefits up to \$421 per month, covering just over half the monthly groceries expense.
- Other \$275: Everything else.

AMERICANS WITH LESS THAN  
\$500 IN SAVINGS

50%

The “Other” cost category is **important** because, within that, a family would try to cover retirement, college funds, savings accounts, credit card interest payments, after school activities (music, sports, art), internet, shopping, nights out, parking fees,

AMERICANS WITH NO EMERGENCY  
SAVINGS AT ALL<sup>55</sup>

39%

unexpected healthcare costs, family trips, holiday and birthday parties and gifts, furniture and appliances, caring for parents and all other expenses.

As one can hopefully imagine, trying to cover all of those, espe-

cially given a shock like a loss of a loved one, loss of a job, a major car repair, or an illness, means difficult choices often have to be made, some of which could impact the food budget.



# Food Access in Mower County

## Resource Centers

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### United Way of Mower County

United Way of Mower County provides individuals with basic needs through fundraising and connecting community members with local resources. Its mission is to improve lives by mobilizing the caring power of communities. United Way also brings together stakeholders, contributors, and agency partners to create collaborative and innovative approaches to help solve community issues.

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### Parenting Resource Center (PRC)

The Parenting Resource Center is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide resources, services, and prevention education to families in southeastern Minnesota. This includes child care, a parenting support program, a family visitation center, and a multicultural welcome center to help diverse community members get connected to resources for food, education, housing, health services and more. The **Welcome Center**, which opened in 2000, was created to support the families of the workers who were coming in to find work at the Austin plants, connecting them with community resources. In 2022, the Welcome Center supported over 1000 individuals. Also in 2022, it merged with the PRC.

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### University of Minnesota Extension

U of M Extension brings Minnesotans together to build a better future through university science-based knowledge, expertise and training. Its research and outreach is organized broadly into four centers: Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources; Community Vitality; Family Development; and Youth Development. Within Mower County, U of M Extension offers educational programs related to health and nutrition.

"Our organization was founded to help families connect to resources and work with those families and help them find stability in all the other aspects of their life. When you arrive in the U.S. as a newcomer, there's just so many things that you are facing with culture shock and having to start from nothing."

—Varinh Van Vugt, Program Coordinator,  
Welcome Center





## Food Access Programs and Services

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### **Semcac**

Semcac's mission is to empower and advocate for people to enhance their self-sufficiency by maximizing community resources. Founded in 1966, Semcac offers over 20 programs across multiple locations including congregate meals, energy assistance, housing rehab loans and emergency services, among others.

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### **Salvation Army**

The Austin Salvation Army has a variety of programs and services to provide the basic needs for community members, including food shelves, emergency services, utility assistance, youth group, community meals and summer kid camps, among others. In 2022, the organization served over 10,000 individuals, and distributed over 232,000 pounds of food valued at \$415,802.

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### **CLUES**

CLUES is a Minnesota-based nonprofit organization that aims to promote social and economic equity for Latinos and new immigrants in Minnesota. The organization offers a variety of programs to increase access to healthy and nutritious foods, including screening for SNAP benefits.

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### **Mower County Snap Office (HHS)**

The Mower County Health and Human Services Food Stamp Office is located in Austin, Minn., and is in charge of administering the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for Austin residents.





## Backpack Programs

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### United Way of Mower County

Their backpack program focuses on children at risk of experiencing hunger in their household during the school year. Children enrolled in the program are given a backpack at the end of each week filled with nutritious meals and snacks. The program works with all Austin public schools in the district and all outer Mower County schools as well. Approximately 500 students receive additional food support weekly through the program. They have approximately 10-15 volunteers each week at the packing events.

“Between school and social stresses, food should not have to be added to the list for these students. Being part of the backpack program and providing food to students for the weekends, I work hard to help eliminate the worry of being hungry. Having kids of my own, I have seen how being hungry can change their attitude and behavior at times, so by continuing to address food insecurity, I hope to be inspired when those students who fought against the struggles overcome them and rise above.”

—Velerie Faulhaber, Backpack Program Coordinator, United Way

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### St. Olaf Lutheran Church (Head Start Program)

St. Olaf’s backpack program packs bags for hundreds of children enrolled in the Austin Head Start program, providing children with nutritious foods to bring home over the weekend.

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### Racine United Methodist Church

Along with a food shelf, Racine Methodist Church has a backpack program for families attending the Stewartsville Public Schools; it started in 2013.

## Congregate Meals

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### Salvation Army

The Salvation Army Community Meals program focuses on curing hunger in Austin by serving one hot meal a day for individuals who come to their doorstep. Currently, they serve dinners Monday through Thursday.

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### Semcac

Semcac offers senior dining for anyone aged 60 and over free of charge. A reservation is required to reserve a meal for the following day, which can be made by contacting the Mower County dining site.

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### Mower County Senior Center

For a membership of \$30/year, the center offers a variety of social activities plus services, including helping with insurance forms, providing counseling, providing support for home maintenance and chores, and helping provide rides to appointments. They also serve weekday lunch meals to members and nonmembers, with options ranging from \$1 to \$6.

## Delivered Meals

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### Semcac

Semcac offers a Meals on Wheels program that provides meals for individuals aged 60 or older, for those unable to prepare a balanced meal and who are confined to their home. Additionally, spouses of applicants are eligible regardless of age. Meals are catered and delivered to recipients' homes by volunteers. To apply you must contact the Mower Meals on Wheels site for a meal the following day.

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### Hot Meals on Wheels

Hot Meals on Wheels, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that has been delivering meals since 1972. It is made up of volunteers who dedicate their time to delivering nutritious meals to residents of Austin who are elderly, or physically or emotionally disabled and unable to obtain or prepare meals for themselves. Meals are prepared at licensed facilities and delivered every day of the week at a cost of \$4 per meal. There are options for those with diet restrictions, such as low sodium, diabetic or gluten-free.

# Government Assistance

## Mower County Health and Human Services (HHS)

Mower County HHS offers financial assistance for those who do not have enough money to meet basic needs. The governmental programs include funds, food, child care and health care. Community members can learn more or apply by visiting the Minnesota Benefits website or contacting the agency for an application.

## Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

As it does across America, SNAP and other federal benefits create a critical safety net for those in need in Mower County. That need was particularly acute during the Covid crises when SNAP applications rose dramatically, stressing the resources of the local office.

Language barriers and the transient nature of some populations are some of the difficulties challenging local SNAP officials, according to Jennie Crews. During the last month of 2022, 4,164 individuals used SNAP in Mower County, with 2,946 being children. This is a considerable increase compared to the total of 2,489 individuals eligible for SNAP in 2019.

Crews notes that there is a significant portion of the population that doesn't qualify for SNAP, but is nevertheless food insecure. "These are families where both parents are working but they are still living paycheck to paycheck and often have to cut back on buying food," says Crews. "That is a population that is really getting missed."

Another challenge faced by many on SNAP is simply staying up to date on the paperwork. Everyone must recertify their benefit eligibility every 6-12 months, depending on the case. Those with income from a job, for example, have to recertify every 6 months. Research estimates that up to 50% who give up their SNAP benefits may have done so involuntarily. In other words, they are still eligible but did not complete the paperwork.<sup>2</sup> That's not hard to imagine given the challenges many of those on SNAP face, from disability to transportation issues to language barriers. To reduce food insecurity, narrowing this gap is an important target.

## SNAP ELIGIBILITY AND BENEFITS BY HOUSEHOLD SIZE<sup>1</sup>

People in Household	Monthly Gross Income Limit (200% of FPG)	Maximum Monthly SNAP Benefit
1	\$2,265	\$281
2	\$3,052	\$516
3	\$3,839	\$740
4	\$4,625	\$939
5	\$5,412	\$1,116
6	\$6,199	\$1,339
7	\$6,985	\$1,480
8	\$7,772	\$1,691
For each additional person over 8...	Add \$787	Add \$211

## National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

The NSLP is a government-assisted program that provides low-cost or free lunches to students in public schools, nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. The program, which started in 1946, serves millions of children across the country.

## Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP)

The MFIP provides aid to families with children, including cash and food assistance, to meet basic needs and support parents to achieve financial stability. Parents are expected to work and have 60 months on the program.

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### **Women, Infants and Children (WIC)**

The WIC is a nutrition and breastfeeding program for eligible low-income pregnant women, new mothers, babies and young children. It focuses on giving nutrition and health information to mothers before, during and after pregnancy as well as tips to feed their children as they grow. The WIC also provides referrals to health and other social services.

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### **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)**

The CSFP is a USDA program administered by the Minnesota Department of Health aimed at improving the health of low-income Minnesota residents 60 years of age or older. It provides them with a monthly box of shelf-stable food (average of \$55 worth of food), along with a newsletter with healthy eating and other educational information. CSFP food packages offer nutrients typically lacking in the diets of individuals involved in the program.

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### **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**

TEFAP is a federal program that enhances the diets of low-income Americans by providing emergency food assistance at no cost. The USDA provides 100% American-grown food and administrative funds, which are made available to state distribution agencies. States provide the food to selected local agencies which in turn distribute to local organizations that can directly serve the public.

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### **Mower Council for the Handicapped**

Mower Council for the Handicapped is a nonprofit organization that provides programs and services to those with physical disabilities to enhance their quality of life. They help with advocacy, lending medical equipment, food assistance and more. The organization is funded by United Way of Mower County, the Hormel Foundation, charitable gaming, and donations.

## **Food Distribution**

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### **Ruby's Pantry - Grace Lutheran Church**



Ruby's Pantry is a nonprofit food assistance program open to anyone, regardless of income or residency. Volunteers from all around gather at churches and other sponsored locations to distribute food to participants, in exchange for a \$25 bundle donation. Grace American Lutheran Church holds a pop-up pantry on the third Thursday of each month. Participants bring two empty laundry baskets, which are then filled with various grocery items by volunteers.

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### **CLUES**

Canasta Familiar is a free food distribution program that provides culturally familiar foods to participants. It is held at multiple locations across Minnesota including Riverland Community College every second and fourth Friday of each month.





## Food Shelves

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### Riverland Community College

Riverland Community College is on a mission to fight food insecurity in the Riverland community. Their pantry is available to all current students facing food challenges. Students can check in using their student ID and take up to three items per day, which include food, clothing and household items.

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### Salvation Army

Austin's Salvation Army food shelf offers a range of groceries, including pantry items, breads, cereal, meats and occasionally fresh produce. The food shelf is run by Salvation Army officers who supervise the program.

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### Channel One Regional Food Bank

Channel One Regional Food Bank is a hunger relief organization, part of Feeding America, with a mission to strengthen food access and build healthy communities. Their association with Feeding America allows them access to millions of pounds of surplus food and grocery donations that can be collected, stored and distributed to those in need.

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### Austin High School Packer Pantry

Packer Pantry offers food, clothing and everyday essentials to any Austin High School student and their family. The organization runs on volunteer work from students and community members who help manage the pantry and donations that come in. Packer Pantry is set up and organized like a store and open for everyone. Around 20-30 students daily "shop" the pantry after school.

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### Racine United Methodist Church

Racine United Methodist Church Food Shelf, in connection with Channel One, works to assist families in need every week. At present, anyone is able to get food from their food shelf. Mondays 9-11 a.m. and Thursdays 6-8 p.m.

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### Brownsdale Our Savior's Lutheran Church

The Brownsdale Our Savior's Lutheran Church has a food pantry that is currently open Thursdays 10 a.m.-11 p.m. and first and third Wednesdays in the afternoon for two hours.



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### LeRoy Foodshelf

The LeRoy Foodshelf is a function of the LeRoy Area Ministerial Association, a domestic nonprofit corporation in Minnesota. It is open on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month to all in need of food items.

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### St. Olaf Lutheran Church (Little Free Pantry)

St. Olaf's Little Free Pantry is a 24-hour pantry containing nonperishable foods and personal care items for anyone in need. All goods can be found in an outdoor storage unit that can be accessed anytime.

## Additional Food Shelves

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Lyle Our Savior's Lutheran Church

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St. Augustine and St. Edwards Churches

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Cornerstone Church

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Grand Meadow Faith Community

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Southland Faith Community

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"For the real work to get done, it is so important to create a common language, common knowledge, and share transparently with the wider community. The Hometown Food Security Project is doing just that. Working in this space for 10 years, I have seen groups take up to 18 months to get started, and so the progress this project has made is hugely impressive. The reason for that is no secret – Hormel has convened the right stakeholders and created meaningful partnerships. Coalition building works best when relationships between public, private, faith-based, and non-profit are intentional and equally invested."

–Katie H. Nye, MSSW, Statewide Field Director, Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty

## Grocery Access

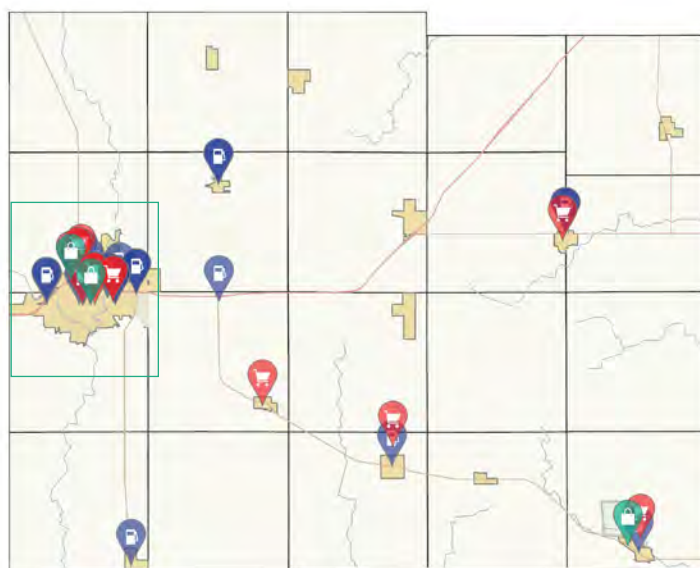
Securing reliable access to both grocery stores and convenience stores is vital in addressing the issue of food insecurity. In Mower County there are a total of 15 grocery stores, the largest being Hy-Vee, ALDI, Jim's MarketPlace Foods and Walmart Supercenter. Additionally, the county has 26 convenience stores and three dollar stores, which are typically

smaller in size and offer a more limited inventory of food products. Convenience stores, however, tend to open for extended hours and/or weekends, increasing access for those with varied work shifts. The county also has a good share of ethnic grocery stores, mostly concentrated in Austin, including K'Nyaw Food Market (Asian food grocery),

Shwe Nyiko Market and Asian Food (Asian food grocery), and the Sudanese Community Market (Sudanese market), among others.

As shown on the map below, the towns with the least access to grocery stores are Lyle, Dexter, Sergeant and Racine.

### MOWER COUNTY GROCERY ACCESS



Area of detail: Austin

Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS



Convenience Stores



Dollar Stores



Grocery

Cities

Township Outlines

## Housing Support

Individuals experiencing homelessness are more prone to food insecurity due to challenges in accessing adequate and nutritious food and therefore suffer from malnutrition and other health conditions. While there are no homeless shelters in Mower County, local organizations do provide resources for people experiencing homelessness or in need of transitional housing.

### Motel Vouchers



- The Salvation Army provides 1–3 day housing vouchers for people in need.
- Mower County Veterans Service Office is available for veterans and widows.
- Mower Council for the Handicapped has vouchers available, and requires recipients to have a credit/debit card.

### Transitional Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing

- Dick Lang’s Room and Board House offers rooms for people in need of housing.
- Semcac Transitional Housing Program requires individuals to locate housing and lease a unit in their name and be willing to create a goal plan to work toward increasing income and securing permanent housing.
- IMS Permanent Supportive Housing is available for families experiencing long-term homelessness for 12 months or those who have had four episodes of homelessness in the last three years, and are eligible for Medical Assistance, or have qualifying insurance. There is a program for singles where individuals need to be eligible for Medical Assistance.
- The Crime Victims Resource Center provides housing for people fleeing domestic violence.
- Fox Pointe is open for individuals who are on the coordinated entry list and eligible for long-term housing.

### Homeless Shelters in Neighboring Counties

- Dorothy Day Hospitality House - Rochester
- Women’s Shelter and Support Center - Rochester
- Hospitality House of Owatonna - men’s shelter
- Connections Shelter - Mankato
- Mankato Salvation Army - men’s shelter
- Bethlehem Inn, Waseca - for women and children
- Rachel’s Light, Meriden - for women
- Ruth’s House, Faribault - for women and children
- Five Sisters Project, Wells - for women
- VonWald Youth Shelter - Rochester
- Doc’s Recovery House - Rochester



# Access Gaps, Opportunities and Key Questions

## Feedback on Local Challenges and Opportunities

Interviews conducted with coalition members harvested many suggestions and insights. Some of those were specific to individual programs but others were more broad. The purpose of this assessment is to identify specific gaps and opportunities that will ultimately strengthen the food security ecosystem in Mower County and expand its impact even further.

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### Information Silos

Getting information to the populations in need was a problem cited by several coalition members. For individuals to access resources requires them to know that the resource exists, the location, the hours of operation and the eligibility requirements for any given program.

- What new methods of sharing information across our network are worth exploring?
- How can we ensure that our most vulnerable populations hear about the resources available?

### Empowerment

To scale our efforts and maximize reach, we need to enable every partner and individual to contribute to the solution.

- How can we develop and share strategies for food insecure individuals and caregivers to pursue and assist with implementing solutions?
- Can we build pathways for community members to support and augment efforts, both those that are being organized, and enabling self-directed initiative?

### Navigating Government Bureaucracy

While federal and state programs form a critical safety net for the food insecure, the regulations surrounding these programs can be onerous for both those trying to access the resource and those managing these programs. These barriers can reduce the delivery of aid. With undocumented immigrants, fear of deportation often limits their engagement with food aid programs.

- How can this fear of engagement be dispelled?
- Should we create new resources or add training to help individuals and families navigate the bureaucracy?
- Would WIC and SNAP-only stores reduce stigma and solve the confusion over what can be purchased with the benefits?



**Fulfilling Needs for our Kids**

Next to SNAP, free school lunch and breakfast programs may be the single most important programs to address childhood hunger.

Of 7,004 public school students in Mower County, 3,155 (45%) qualify for free or reduced lunch. For a variety of reasons, not all those eligible for the programs are using them.

Based on estimates from school nutrition personnel (70% utilization rate for Austin HS, and an optimistic 85% utilization rate for the rest of

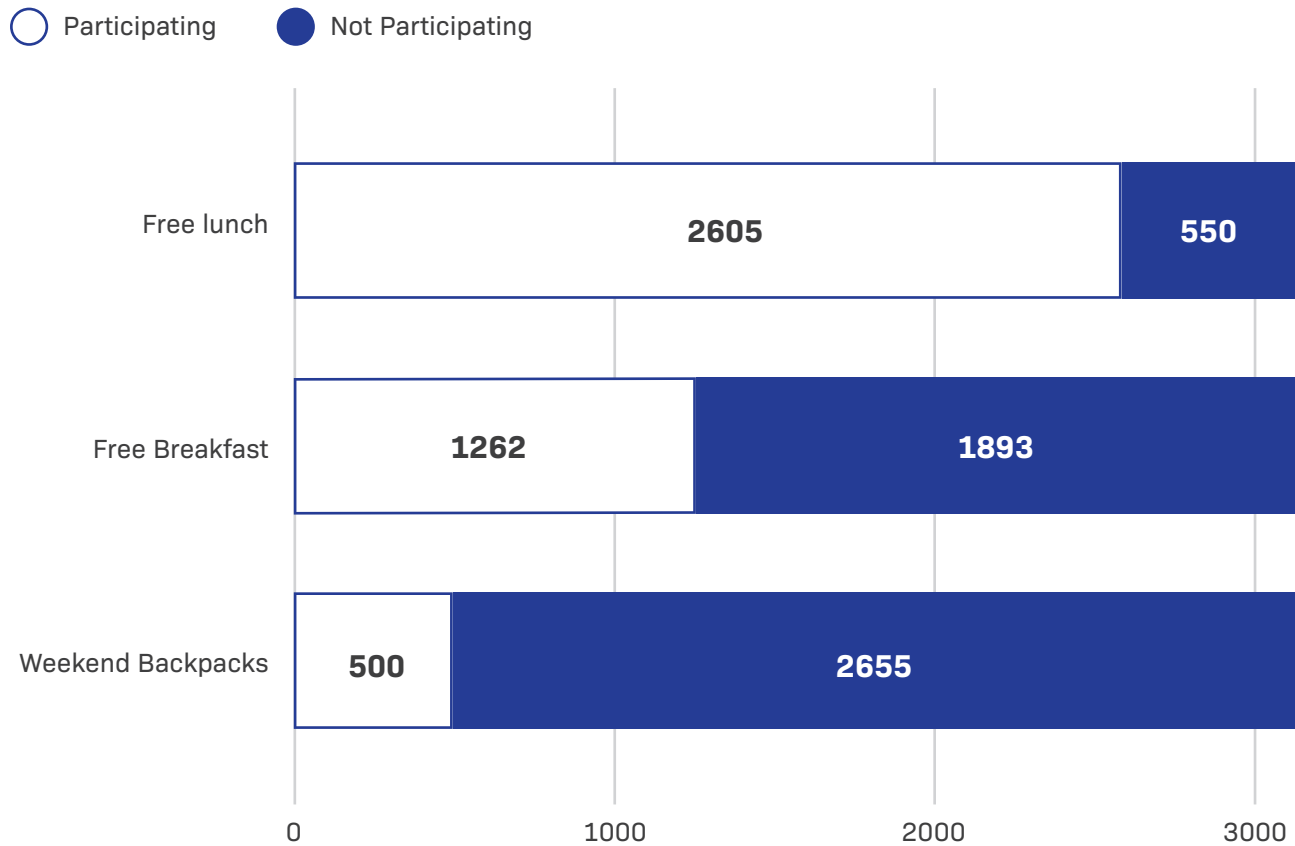
the county), more than 500 students eligible for free or reduced lunch are not participating in the program on a given day. Triple that number could be participating in the breakfast program, but aren't regularly.

Students in Austin have other lunch options within walking distance, which accounts for some of the lower utilization rate there. And many eat breakfast at home. Elementary breakfast utilization rates are higher than upper grades, because it is served in the classroom. At the high school,

there is just a 10-minute window to get breakfast before the first bell. In summary, school nutrition staff believe there is potential for higher utilization.

The community does a remarkable job with the weekend backpack program, assembling and delivering 500 each weekend. But perhaps some or many of the 2,655 students who qualify for free or reduced lunch would benefit from a backpack program as well.

**SCHOOL MEALS AND WEEKEND BACKPACK PROGRAMS**





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## Language and Cultural Barriers

With over 100 languages spoken in our community, language and other cultural barriers (including religious food restrictions and preferences) were mentioned by all coalition members interviewed. In reaching new immigrants, coalition members often told of utilizing intermediate organizations (churches, mosques or cultural affinity groups/events) to reach underserved populations and communicate the aid available. The group underscored the importance of being culturally sensitive when working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, including respecting their beliefs and appreciating the uniqueness of their culture. This approach ensures the success of the programs and enables individuals to communicate effectively and avoid conflicts, while fostering a sense of connection and belonging.

- How can the coalition best enlist the support of these organizations to ensure all immigrant groups are reached?
- How can the coalition strengthen access to culturally appropriate foods through existing programs?

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## Adding Fresh Produce

Increasing availability of fresh produce in food banks and other food access programs was noted on several wish lists. Fruits and vegetables contain essential vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that are helpful for overall health, nutrition and well-being. But fresh produce adds a layer of difficulty given its perishable nature. Certain food shelves in Mower County are considered “super shelves” and do include fresh produce, but there are opportunities for more. Similarly, the need for shelf-stable products like yogurt, milk or bread to supplement existing food inventories was noted by many.

- How can existing food access programs incorporate additional fresh produce?
- What are the barriers and how can the coalition address these?

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## Staffing and Program Resiliency

A great deal of food security work relies on key people with decades of experience within our community. As these leaders approach retirement age, we need to develop a talent pipeline to ensure a knowledge transfer and the continuation and growth of these programs across generations.

- How can coalition members store and communicate their institutional knowledge for future leaders?

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## Volunteer Shortages

Many coalition members rely on volunteers to run their programs. Numbers declined during the Covid crisis. In addition, volunteers tend to be drawn from an older demographic, who may want or need to reduce their time commitment.

- How can the coalitions promote volunteerism across all ages in our community to ensure the continuity and resiliency of these programs?

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## Lack of Affordable Housing

The absence of a homeless shelter in Mower County was noted as a gap in serving the community. Adequate shelter is an essential component of an individual's well-being. Housing insecurity also hampered the ability of state and federal programs to keep track of those in need.

- How can the coalition advocate to bridge this gap in Mower County over the next 2-5 years?
- How can existing programs better serve this constituency?

"There are some gaps in serving the homeless. It should be getting better by 2024 with the upcoming opening of a low income apartment complex. That's one area where Mower County has a lot of challenges, in helping people once they're homeless to either get rehoused or to be provided for in the interim. One of the biggest things we do at Salvation Army with fighting homelessness is the rent and utilities support program, because we really try to defeat homelessness before it occurs."

—Jeff Strickler, Major, Corps Officer, The Salvation Army

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## Tracking a Moving Target

It was clear from our interviews that solving food insecurity in Mower County is a fluid and evolving problem. Economic circumstances and state and federal policies can change quickly and have large impacts. Regional or national emergencies often impact the most vulnerable. This means that our response must be agile and our understanding of the problem continuously updated.

- What mechanisms can the coalition establish to ensure we are keeping track of changing patterns of need?
- What are some possible changes (the next epidemic for example) that we can predict and plan for?

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## Regional Food Bank Agility

The regional food bank for Mower County is currently Channel One, but Mower is only 1 of 11 counties it serves. Regional food banks are currently set up as a key link in the donation, distribution and funding supply chain. As the coalition and community adopt innovative approaches to achieve bold goals, this setup may become a bottleneck.

- How can the regional food bank keep up with the coalition's efforts? Or is there another way to accomplish needed flexibility and responsiveness?

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## Isolation and Limited Transportation

Several coalition members commented on the difficulty of transportation for a number of the populations impacted by food insecurity. This included both the difficulty of delivering food to the housebound (particularly the elderly and disabled) and people's ability to travel to stores.

- How can the coalition strengthen food distribution?
- What are potential partnerships with food delivery companies?
- How can local food distribution maintain resilience through international crises?





# The Road Ahead

## Potential Opportunities for Discussion

1

### Communication

- Manage and update dedicated webpage for the Hometown Food Security Project as a central clearing house for information and resources in multiple languages.
- Produce a monthly newsletter to facilitate communication between stakeholders and community outreach.
- Promote awareness, events and resources via social media.
- Leverage social media platforms to engage community members.
- Adopt technologies that improve resource management and availability.

2

### Community Engagement

- Create a program to encourage citizen volunteering, donations and outreach such as in-person or online training events for volunteers for all coalition members to promote programs.
- Create signage and material for mobile information tables that can be staffed by coalition members at public events and community gatherings to spread awareness of resources and promote volunteer opportunities.
- Hold hometown hunger summits with other communities to ensure the sharing of best practices.

3

### Facilities/Infrastructure/ Resources

- Create a food security office to increase coordination between resource providers.
- Explore crowdfunding opportunities.



## 4

### Outside Coalition Partnership Opportunities

- Partner with food delivery companies such as DoorDash, Grubhub or UberEats to explore home delivery from food banks.
- Partner with university researchers who are tracking and studying hunger and food insecurity..
- Expand coalition partnerships to support ancillary resources (housing, education, job opportunities).

## 5

### Studies/Knowledge Collection

- Conduct a survey of county residents to fully understand the problem at hand.
- Conduct small-scale surveys of priority sub-populations (seniors in Austin, students in Lyle, etc.) to rapidly assess impact and progress, and optimize ongoing effort.
- Learn the lessons of the pandemic. Harvest knowledge from coalition members about how we can be better prepared for the next local, national or international crisis.

## 6

### Government Policies, Lobbying, and Opportunities for change

- Advocate for MN to adopt a SNAP benefit for restaurants for seniors.
- Help local SNAP officials by assisting low income applicants with their applications, and recertifications.
- Apply to the USDA for a waiver to pilot a simplified, shorter SNAP application, with less frequent recertification requirements.



## Becoming Future Ready

The future of food insecurity will be impacted by forces both inside and outside our community. As we begin to plan for the future, and strive for a resilient food system, it may be worth contemplating the potential impact of various forces that may shape that future. Some combination of these social, environmental and technological changes will usher in both challenges and new opportunities.

### Forces of Change

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#### Demographic Shifts

Mower County has seen dramatic changes in populations over the last generation. How is the county's population likely to change (age, life expectancy, ethnicity, wealth level/concentrations etc.) over the next generation?

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#### Factory and Farm Automation

Will entry-level labor opportunities disappear?

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#### Tomorrow's Pandemic

What lessons have we learned to better prepare for next time?

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#### Autonomous Vehicles and Drone deliveries

New technologies are revolutionizing transportation and food delivery. How will that affect community needs and our mission?

---

#### Harnessing the Gig Economy

Point-to-point Uber-like public transportation systems that provide better service and that are more cost effective than traditional bus services are now available. How might that relate to our work or priorities?

---

#### AI-Assisted Food Waste Reduction and Recovery

Can new data revolutions create new sources of food for the needy?

---

#### Universal Basic Income

Could Mower County pioneer a version of universal basic income?

---

#### Crowd Funding Opportunities

Have we leveraged the many online apps as avenues of fundraising?

---

#### Food Preservation Technology

More and more food stuffs are becoming increasingly shelf stable. How will this affect food pantry offerings and food availability?

---

#### Peer-to-Peer

Peer-to-Peer food commerce and philanthropy facilitated by apps and social media.

---

#### International Disruption

How can local food distribution maintain resilience through international crises?

---

#### Climate Disruption

How could Mower County resources, communities, and food supply chains be impacted?



## The Coalition's Next Steps

With the community asset mapping complete, and with this report to help share that knowledge, the next steps are:

- 1 Determine key priority areas and action steps, incorporate those into a Strategic Plan with Goals and Action teams.
- 2 Community members who opted in to participate are invited to the Action team creation work.
- 3 Strengthen resources and allocate investments toward most at-risk populations and locations.
- 4 Revisit progress, goals and process regularly to assess our approach, and to continuously improve.

## The Road Ahead and a Call to Action

The multivarious causes of food insecurity make it a challenging problem to solve. It is a problem deeply embedded in longstanding and overlapping social, economic, and racial inequities. Consequently, no singular approach will suffice. This is why the diversity of perspectives brought to the table by the Hometown Food Security coalition is our strength. We are professionals, volunteers, non-profit organizers, government employees, and community leaders who have witnessed the consequences of food insecurity first hand. We also believe that the abundance of community

spirit and good will within Mower County is more than up to the challenge.

Poverty and need exist in our community today and the consequences are far reaching. Food insecurity, in particular, is linked with exposure to violence and difficulties throughout an individual's life.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most tragically, it can reach across generations. So our work is not just to solve the problems of today but also to disrupt the generational cycles of poverty and create a brighter future for children yet to be born.

Our aims are ambitious but the work is underway. We welcome the support, participation and feedback from anyone in our community and beyond. Learn more about our coalition, track the progress, and find ways to get involved at:

[HometownFoodSecurity.org](https://HometownFoodSecurity.org).



# Appendices



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## G. FAQ



When the Coalition asked us in early January to help compile this report, our team was both excited and honored. Given the Coalition's ambitious goals and schedule, we knew time was of the essence. We began data gathering, researching and setting up a range of stakeholder interviews right away. But we also reached out to the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty with a request – could we visit for a day and get a download on their best practices and recommendations? Not only did they say yes, they welcomed Ethan Watters and me with open arms, spending the greater part of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday sharing their expertise and advice with us. We felt as if we completed a graduate-level course in Community Assessment Report Writing-in one day.

We would like to again thank Jeremy, Craig, Katie, Elijah and Patricia for their time, expertise and contributions to the process of compiling this report.

–Garrett Law & Ethan Watters



## A. Methodology

### 1. Data and Rationale

- We chose to use 2020 Map the Meal Gap data throughout the report, as the best way to compare national, state and Mower County rates for food insecurity. It should be noted that at the time of writing, the 2021 data sets were projections, so official data for 2021 was not yet available.
- Our development of this report was guided in part by A Toolkit for Developing and Strengthening Hunger Free Community Coalitions, from Baylor University / Texas Hunger Initiative (THI).
- The THI Toolkit is a guide that “provides important strategies and best practice considerations for [Hunger Free Community] Coalitions.” The recommended steps include: 1) recruiting participants; 2) establishing a coalition structure; 3) planning for action; 4) taking action; and 5) assess progress. This report is a product of step 3, Planning for Action (p. 24), which recommends a community assessment to “serve as a catalyst for the next steps.”

### 2. Charts and Maps Generation

The map images throughout the report were generated using the geographic mapping software ArcGIS Pro. Using a variety of tools through ArcGIS, we created layers showing food insecurity rate, poverty rate, unemployment rate, disability rate, grocery stores, food pantries, senior centers, resource centers, schools, convenience stores, affordable housing, food deserts, walkable grocery access and life expectancy in Mower County.

- The data used to create the poverty, food insecurity, disability and unemployment rate layers was provided by the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty and online census data.
- The data used to create the grocery, food pantry, resource center, senior center and school layers was collected through online research, databases and personal contacts.
- The data used to create the “affordable housing” layer was from Housing and Urban Developed (HUD) online resources.
- The “food desert” layer was created by using the “buffer” tool set to 10 miles from the grocery store, “erase” tool used to erase areas inside the 10-mile grocery buffer, and “select by attribute” tool set to <20% poverty rate to find the area that met the USDA definition of a food desert.
- The “walkable access to grocery stores” layer was created by using the buffer tool set to 0.5 miles/10 minute walk on the “grocery store” layer.
- The “walkable access to grocery stores” layer was created by using the buffer tool set to 0.5 miles/10 minute walk on the “grocery store” layer.



## B. Acknowledgments

### Hormel Foods

A special thanks to the entire Hormel Foods Corporate Communications team for their leadership of this effort and ongoing support.

- Wendy Watkins, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer
- Cory Howe, Head Photographer
- Gene Lifka, Multimedia Specialist
- Stephanie Postma, Agile Development Leader & Coalition Facilitator
- Katie Fedoryk, Communications Manager
- Kevin Myers, Senior Vice President, Research and Development and Quality Control
- Joe Swedberg, Past Chairman of the Board, Farm Foundation; Retired Hormel Foods Executive

### Coalition Members

A sincere thank you to each and every one of the coalition members for their invaluable contributions toward bringing this project to fruition. Their expertise, engagement and support have been instrumental throughout the entire process.

A special mention to Faro Jones, registered dietitian at Mayo Clinic Health System, who was interviewed for this project and was involved in early stages of coalition building.

### Editors

- Ethan Watters, Head of Story, Attention Span Media
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- Oballa Oballa, Hormel Production Supervisor and former Austin City Council Member
- Taggart Medgaarden, Executive Director, Austin HRA
- Sarah Scherger, Pediatrician at Mayo Clinic Health System, Austin
- Rain Prehsoeklwee, Community Health Worker, Mower County HHS

### Special Thanks

#### **Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty**

- Craig Gundersen, Ph.D., Snee Family Endowed Chair at BCHP, Professor in the Department of Economics at Baylor University, lead researcher on Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap
- Jeremy Everett, Founder and Executive Director
- Katie H. Nye, Statewide Field Director and Regional Director in the Austin Region
- Elijah Tanner, Project Specialist
- Patricia Agado, Academic Scheduling Coordinator





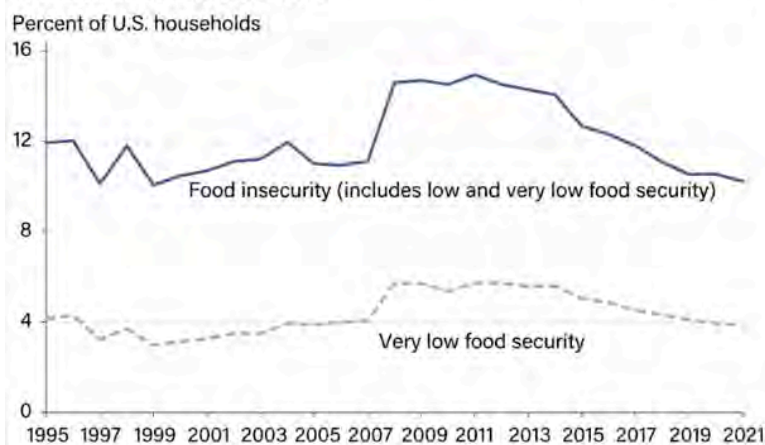
## C. History of Food Insecurity + Federal Assistance Programs

The current measure of household food insecurity was first administered as an addition to the Current Population Survey in April of 1995.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this, measurements of food insecurity varied, and there was no strong consensus. To better understand the early history of food insecurity in the U.S., it is best to look at the history of federal food assistance programs.

Hunger in the U.S. gained significant attention during the Great Depression, which left about one-fourth of the workforce unemployed. To solve this, the government purchased surplus wheat from farmers to donate to hunger relief efforts, marking a major shift in the government's role in hunger relief – which had traditionally been left to private organizations.<sup>2</sup>

In 1939 the first Food Stamp Program (FSP) was created, reaching about 20 million people over the course of four years. It ended in 1943, and the next 18 years consisted of studies, reports and proposals. In 1961, President Kennedy announced the initiation of the Food Stamp pilot program which expanded to 22 states by 1964. On January 31, 1964, President Johnson called on Congress to pass legislation making FPS permanent.<sup>3</sup> The program would expand in the following decades and eventually be overhauled by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As stated earlier, since 1995, there has been a quantifiable way to measure food insecurity, giving us a better picture of how it has changed in recent history. The chart below shows the trends from 1995 to 2021:<sup>4</sup>

**Trends in prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 1995–2021**



Note: Prevalence rates for 1996 and 1997 were adjusted for the estimated effects of differences in data collection screening protocols used in those years.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

## D. Coalition and Stakeholder Survey

### 1. Objective

As a precursor to developing the report, the core team conducted site visits, phone calls and surveyed coalition volunteers and organizations in the area to gain additional information on community resources and programs in Mower County, Minnesota. The survey gathered 32 responses from 19 organizations. A sample of the survey is below.

### 2. Food Resource Fieldwork Survey

#### Survey Questionnaire Food Resource Fieldwork

##### Background Information

Core team member name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date of fieldwork call/visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Fieldwork Format:

- ☐ Phone Call  
☐ Site Visit

##### Resource Information

Resource/program name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Coordinating organization: \_\_\_\_\_  
Resource type:

- ☐ Backpack program  
☐ Congregate meal  
☐ Delivered meal  
☐ Financial assistance  
☐ Food distribution (pop up)  
☐ Food shelf  
☐ Advocacy and education  
☐ Other:

Contact name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact email: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Resource address: \_\_\_\_\_

Service area: \_\_\_\_\_

Target population: \_\_\_\_\_

Eligibility guidelines: \_\_\_\_\_

Cost of service: \_\_\_\_\_

How and when service can be accessed:

\_\_\_\_\_

Average number of individuals served  
monthly: \_\_\_\_\_

Food sourcing partners (if resource provides  
food): \_\_\_\_\_

##### Continued Engagement


Interested in HFSP involvement?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Other contacts to include in future  
communications: \_\_\_\_\_

Willing to complete follow up form with  
additional insights on food security efforts?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No



### 3. Highlights from Survey Responses

#### **Are there any programs or areas that you are looking to further develop in the future?**

- Would like to strengthen collaborations with the county and Mayo Clinic Health System, Austin Public School.
- An area of need that students often mention is having shelf-stable yogurt and milk options and bread available. We used to get some of these things (dairy) from the backpack program, but that program is no longer functioning like it did in the past.
- More culturally appropriate foods.
- We are looking to grow our language services to meet the needs of the community.

#### **What are the most underserved populations or hardest to reach in Mower County?**

- Latino community, due to pride/stigma.
- Currently working to gather this data.
- Individuals with nontraditional immigration statuses, and those experiencing homelessness. (For example, undocumented and non-immigrants residing through free agency compacts are not eligible for SNAP or other federal benefits.)

#### **Where do you see the gaps in resources for those in need?**

- Health insurance applications, awareness of resources for families with small children/infants, resources for undocumented individuals.
- We struggle to direct families with significant long-term needs to other organizations in the community (medical, dental, long-term food security, baby needs, etc.).
- Language barriers, culturally appropriate foods.
- Foods specific to ethnic background.
- In understanding of legal statutes, transportation, food options, and qualifications.



### **What are the main barriers that prevent you from scaling your impact further?**

- Permanent location for distributions, we have moved to so many locations.
- We do not have the room to grow our food pantry, but [it is serving the intended purpose].
- Food sourcing.
- Finding interpreters for less common languages spoken in the community, and having funding to pay for our interpreters.

### **What hopes do you have in the creation of the Hometown Food Security Coalition?**

- To have a stable food shelf that is open three to four times a week, a permanent location for the food shelf and distribution.
- We hope this coalition can bring together resources from across Mower County to more efficiently serve families in need. We hope that this helps create a type of one-stop shop for families and that, somehow, all provided resources can be shared with community schools, churches and organizations that can help get the word out.
- To create more awareness of the food insecurity situation, as well as to find more ways to serve those in need.
- Giving basic needs to all.
- More community members will be able to receive assistance and there will be more awareness that hardships affect everyone regardless of immigration and employment status.



## 4. Town hall and Community Input

As part of the coalition process, several community meetings were held. The meetings were a crucial step in organizing the direction of the coalition early on. Teams shared ideas, identified resources at their disposal and recognized possible gaps.

### **What would you want your neighbors to feel when visiting a food resource?**

- Welcomed by volunteers
- Accepted
- Cultural food available
- Safe and comfortable
- Included
- Multiple languages spoken or written in signage
- Supported and dignified
- Like their stress is reduced
- Relief
- The impact of “systems” on how a person feels welcomed and respected
- Confident in what the process looks like
- Empowered to provide for their family
- Feel like they have choices and access to what they need to feed their families

### **What did you hear today that is resonating? Surprising? Eye-opening?**

- Eye-opener: how can we better communicate services to the community that could benefit them?
- Resilience
- It seems that a key focus area has to do with the necessity of information required to enroll in a food security program.
- The fear of giving personal information and even showing up to food banks
- How can we change the process of collecting information to help those with mistrust of the system?
- They shouldn’t have to justify their need if they’ve had the courage to show up and ask for food. For providers: how much information do you need to gather for funding? Can you minimize it or put it in an anonymous format?
- Surprised by the nuance of stigma: external “embarrassed to see me”; internal “I should be doing better.”





Easel Pad  
Tableau à feuilles mobiles  
Block de Hojas Reposición



3.2 in. (2.3 in. x 2.08 in.)  
5.2 pt/ft<sup>2</sup> (2.5 pt/ft x 2.08 pt/ft)  
Cont. 1 block de 30 hojas

Schools

Farmers Market

Farms

Salvation Army

Lack of Awareness

Meals on Wheels

expensive only in Austin

Lack of Transport

Packer Pantry

Channel One

Only Monthly

Ruby's Pantry

Gas Station

Churches

(CLUES

Restaurant

Not wanting to admit help is needed

cooking class

Senior Center

Variety of what you need

Grocery Store

Private Grower

Riverland Food Pantry

community Garden

Family + Friends

Cost of food

rtunities

Food Shelf Stability

Backpack Program

etter + More Transportation options

Soup Kitchen

Community Neighborhood Connecting

Community Awareness

More food Choices/options

Funding

meal prep events/groups

More grocery stores around town

- Surprised: storage challenges can actually exist at the individual, food shelf and food bank levels.
- Sometimes people who are known in the community get embarrassed when they need help. We have seen this at the Parenting Resource Center with school teachers, attorneys, nurses to name a few.

### **Theme: Accessibility**

- Transportation challenges
- Limitations on fresh food or ready-to-eat meals
- One visit per month can be challenging for transportation and storage reasons.
- Traditional food shelf hours can be difficult to access.
- Culturally specific food shelf locations?
- Offer food shelves in the out-country rural towns. Also, perhaps the senior center would be a good distribution location.
- Striving for the goal of “neighborhood” access. Residents are within walking distance from their home to available food.
- Volunteer opportunities for those who utilize the food shelves
- Spanish speaking and other language volunteers
- Collaborate with local multicultural venues to organize a food shelf within their location or a weekly filled “small library” outside their location
- Promote alternative forms of food access: home delivery, distributions at community locations, use of proxy shoppers
- Mobile pantries
- Agencies offering multiple services, collection of information is key to help provide additional services and/or referral to provide additional assistance to clients. Are there better ways to do this that clients perceive as less threatening?
- Example of monthly food distribution that doesn’t ask questions but there is a charge. Those coming are overwhelmingly white. Not sure if it is the location, time, selection of food or the cost that is a barrier to the minority community members to attend.
- Working with our community health workers to connect patients who have identified food insecurity as a social determinant of health with community resources. This facilitates to the EMC and FindHelp.
- Establishing trust is critical. Organizations that hold the relationships must reach out to the community who might benefit.
- SNAP-ED can work with food shelves and offer health and nutrition classes.
- Explore the “supershelf” model; look at other superhelves in the region to learn from them such as in St. James or Northfield (similar demographics).
- Increase the frequency of visits to more than once a month.
- Expand food shelf hours, especially evening and/or weekend. Ask your community for input.
- Start a community garden, provide home garden support, offer CSA shares
- Include recipes along with items in the pantry

### **Theme: Gaps and Opportunities**

- Food shelf shoppers want to be able to help out and support the organization.



- Must acknowledge the role that food plays in social connection.
- The household one feeds may be broader than who lives together.
- Allow the food shelf client to define their household members and composition.
- Develop processes that allow for all (including food shelf clients) to volunteer.
- Food repairs relationships; food builds relationships.
- People want to see themselves in the organizations that they access food from: culturally relevant food; someone that looks like us.
- Several languages (maybe partnering with community organizations that can provide language support).
- Acknowledge the work of organizing translation services and invest in organizations that provide them.
- Prepping translators so they can accurately speak to the intake/check-in process.
- Make a community kitchen available

### **Theme: Dignity**

- All volunteers and staff reinforce an experience of dignity and respect.
- Lack of privacy in accessing food
- Process can feel like interrogation to “prove” need.
- Unlimited visits per month
- Shopping experience with options: depending on family size, families can choose between a certain number of proteins, vegetables, grains, etc.
- Shift from forms to fill out on site to limited check-in ahead of time and use of a QR code/number.
- Streamline check-in process to reduce barriers with a food first model.
- Allowing shoppers to decline some intake questions if they don’t want to answer them.
- Some volunteers are from the communities and speak the language.
- Securing food for your family through resources in the community may lower stress levels; money for food can be used in other areas for their family lessened time spent at work allows more time spent with family.
- Volunteer trainings and regular shift check-ins to reinforce the value of dignity.
- Develop volunteer and staff standards, onboarding and ongoing training to increase focus on customer service.
- Review the language that is used to describe the food shelf and food resources, shifting from limiting language to broader, more expansive resources.

### **What could you do to help address these themes across food access?**

- Listen to the community, they have the solution!
- Help start a Mower County Food Council or Food Access Group.
- Work closely with local partners and institutions to support the work and not duplicate the work.

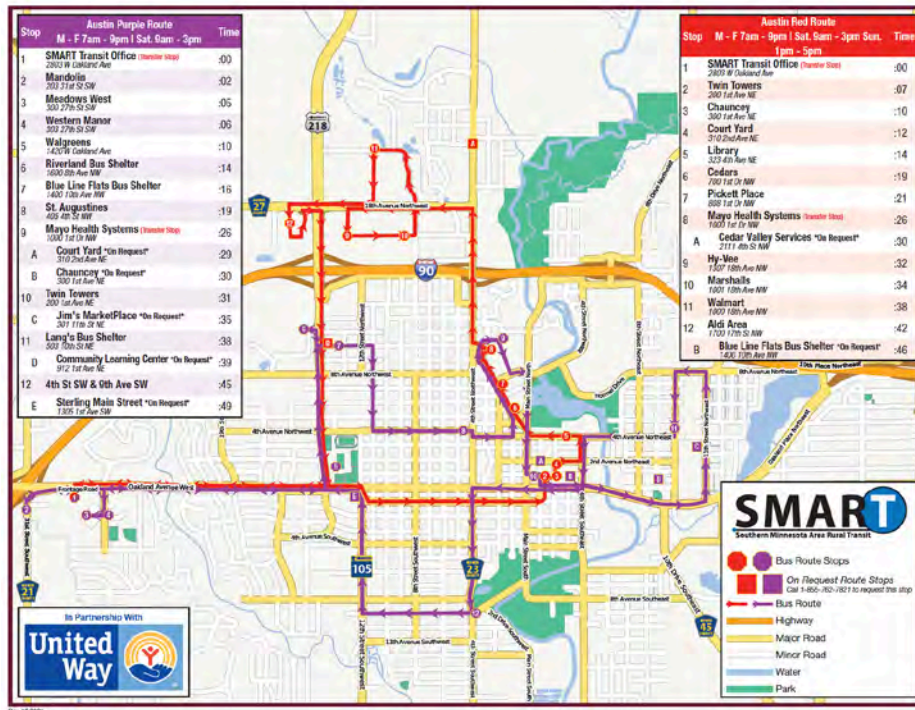
## E. Additional Data

### 1. Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility by School Building

Schools	Students	Free Lunch	Reduced-Priced Lunch	% Eligible for Lunch Benefits
Total:	6716	2450	606	46%
Austin Senior High	1273	410	103	40%
Ellis Junior High School	819	336	87	52%
IJ Holton Intermediate School	733	335	66	55%
Southgate Elementary School	519	206	53	50%
Banfield Elementary School	436	184	40	51%
Woodson Kindergarten Center	393	180	48	58%
Neveln Elementary School	276	129	25	56%
Sumner Elementary School	248	148	32	73%
Austin Area Learning Center	196	91	17	55%
Grand Meadow Elementary	188	26	3	15%
Lyle Secondary	160	66	23	56%
Southland Elementary	159	29	17	29%
Grand Meadow Middle	149	24	3	18%
Lyle Elementary	146	60	19	54%
Southland Senior High	143	12	15	19%
Leroy Secondary	143	20	7	19%
CLC Pre-Kindergarten	135	61	15	56%
Grand Meadow Senior High	129	12	4	12%
Southland Middle	108	18	9	25%
Leroy Elementary	107	19	2	20%
Austin Online Academy	81	24	4	35%
Austin Community Learning Center	73	34	3	51%
SMEC ALC	46	13	7	43%
Success East	16	5	2	44%
Enrich GM	12	3	0	25%
CARDS Program	11	2	1	27%
RESET	10	3	1	40%
First Step Adams	7	0	0	0%
Austin Elementary Online	0	0	0	0%
New Dominion Academy	0	0	0	0%

### 2. Transit Map

SMART Transit provides public transportation throughout southern Minnesota's rural areas, including Mower County. Below is the transit map for the city of Austin.<sup>5</sup>



### 3. SNAP Application

Snap eligibility and benefit amounts vary by state. You can find more information on your state government website. The FAQ section of this appendix contains more info on common SNAP questions.

For Minnesota, the application and additional information can be accessed on the website of the Minnesota Department of Human Services ([mn.gov/dhs](https://mn.gov/dhs)) at: **[SNAP Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#)**.

Apply online: <https://mnbenefits.mn.gov/>

The paper version of the application is currently 24 pages, with the application running 15 pages followed by 9 pages of instructions and notices.

View or Download at: <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-5223-ENG-pform>

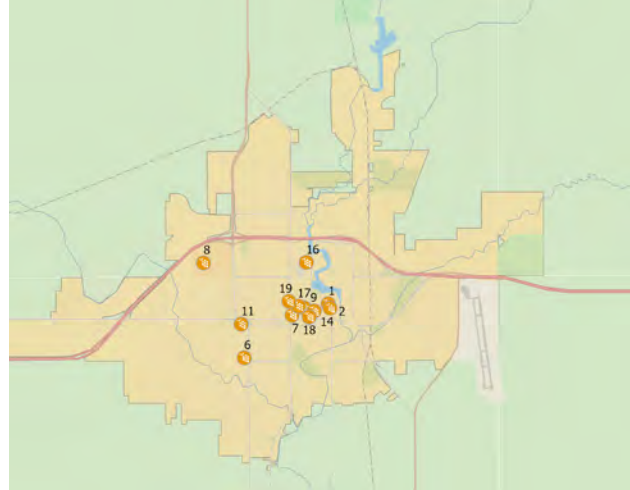
### 4. Food Insecurity Year over Year Growth in Mower County and Minnesota

Mower County Food Insecurity: General Population							
Year	Food Insecure Individuals (#)	Food Insecure Individuals (%)	MN Average	Mower vs State	YOY Change	# Change	% Change
2009	4,200	11.0%	11.2%	Lower	-	-	-
2010	3,910	10.1%	11.5%	Lower	Decrease	-290	-6.9%
2011	3,930	10.1%	11.4%	Lower	Increase	20	0.5%
2012	4,040	10.3%	10.7%	Lower	Increase	110	2.8%
2013	4,040	10.3%	10.6%	Lower	No Change	0	0.0%
2014	3,820	9.7%	10.4%	Lower	Decrease	-220	-5.4%
2015	3,510	9.0%	9.9%	Lower	Decrease	-310	-8.1%
2016	3,440	8.8%	9.2%	Lower	Decrease	-70	-2.0%
2017	3,390	8.6%	9.1%	Lower	Decrease	-50	-1.5%
2018	3,510	8.9%	8.2%	Higher	Increase	120	3.5%
2019	3,720	9.3%	7.7%	Higher	Increase	210	6.0%
2020	3,343	8.4%	6.0%	Higher	Decrease	-377	-10.1%
2021	4,020	10.1%	8.6%	Higher	Decrease	677	20.3%

Mower County Food Insecurity: Children (18 and Under)							
Year	Food Insecure Children (#)	Food Insecure Children (%)	MN Average	Mower vs State	YOY Change	# Change	% Change
2009	1,950	20.4%	18.3%	Higher	-	-	-
2010	1,650	17.7%	16.7%	Higher	Decrease	-300	-15.4%
2011	1,810	18.5%	16.6%	Higher	Increase	160	9.7%
2012	1,870	19.0%	16.1%	Higher	Increase	60	3.3%
2013	1,850	18.8%	16.0%	Higher	Increase	-20	-1.1%
2014	1,590	16.1%	15.2%	Higher	Decrease	-260	-14.1%
2015	1,420	14.5%	13.8%	Higher	Decrease	-170	-10.7%
2016	1,320	13.5%	12.7%	Higher	Decrease	-100	-7.0%
2017	1,260	12.9%	12.6%	Higher	Decrease	-60	-4.5%
2018	1,310	13.2%	12.4%	Higher	Increase	50	4.0%
2019	1,410	14.2%	11.3%	Higher	Increase	100	7.6%
2020	1,370	13.8%	9.3%	Higher	Decrease	-40	-2.8%
2021	1,510	15.2%	12.5%	Higher	Increase	140	10.2%

## F. Additional Maps + Data Tables

### 1. Food Pantries



Locations	Food Pantries	Type	Address	Phone Number	Hours
1	Mower Senior Center Food Shelf	Food Distribution	400 3rd Avenue NE Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-2370	2nd Monday of the month 9:30AM - 11:30AM
2	Austin, MN Salvation Army Food Shelf	Food Shelf	409 1st Ave NE Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-4566	Tues 9AM - 11:30AM, 1PM - 3:30PM Wed 1PM - 3:30PM
3	Southland Faith Community Food Shelf - Little Cedar and	Food Shelf	308 Lewison St Adams, MN 55909	(507) 582-3185	N/A
4	Le Roy Area Food Shelf	Food Shelf	350 W Main St Le Roy, MN 55951	(507) 440-3942	1st Thursday of the month 12PM - 1PM
5	Grand Meadow Food Shelf	Food Shelf	209 2nd Ave NE Grand Meadow, MN 55936	(507) 481-7543	The 2nd and 4th Monday of the month 4:30PM - 6:00PM
6	Ruby's Pantry	Food Distribution	700 12th SW Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-3445	Third Thursday of the Month 4pm-5:30PM
7	Packer Pantry	Food Shelf	301 3rd St NW Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-8857	Monday-Friday (8:15am-3:45pm)
8	Riverland Food Pantry	Food Shelf	1900 8th Ave NW Austin East Building Room C126 Austin	(507) 433-0600	Monday-Thursday (1pm-4pm) Friday (11am-2pm)
9	St. Olaf Lutheran Church	Backpack Program	306 2nd Street Northwest Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-8857	24 Hours
10	Channel One Regional Food Bank	Food Bank	131 35th Street SE Rochester, MN 55904	(507) 424-1707	Monday-Thursday (8am-6pm) Friday (8am-12pm)
11	Cornerstone Church Austin	Food Shelf	1403 1st Ave SW Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-7008	Office hours: 9:00AM- 5:00PM mon-thursday Service times: Saturday 5:00PM, Sundays 9:00AM and
12	Lyle Our Savior's Lutheran Church	Food Shelf	103 Pershing Ave Lyle, MN 55953	(507) 433-3445	N/A
13	Racine Methodist	Food Shelf	401 East Main Street P.O. Box 127 Racine, MN 55967	(507) 378-4801	service: 8:30 am
14	WIC (Women, Infant & Children)	Nutrition Program	1005 N Main St Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-9799	Mon, Tues: 8:00AM - 12PM, 1:00PM - 4:30PM, Wed: 8:00AM - 12PM
15	American Red Cross—Disaster	Humanitarian Organization	305 Alliance Pl NE Rochester, MN 55906	(507) 287-2200	N/A
16	Austin Hot Meals on Wheels	Delivered Meals	Hot Meals on Wheels, Inc. PO BOX 371 AUSTIN, MN 55912	507-438-3140	Varies
17	Semcac	Delivered Meals	111 North Main #201 Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-5889	Varies
18	Christ Episcopal Church	N/A	301 3rd Avenue NW Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-3782	Sunday service: 10AM
19	CLUES	Food Distribution	111 Main St N Austin, MN 55912	(507) 355-2575	2nd and 4th Friday of the month 12PM - 2PM (while supplies last)
20	St. Augustine Church	Food Shelf	405 4th Street NW Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-4537	Tuesday - Friday 8:00AM - 4:30PM
21	Brownsdale Our Savior's Lutheran Church	Food Shelf	411 W Main St Brownsdale, MN 55918	(507) 567-2329	N/A



## 2. Resource Centers



Key Locations	Street	Phone
Parenting Resource Center	105 1st St SE Suite A, Austin, MN 55912	1(507) 437-8330
Welcome Center	111 Main St N #101, Austin, MN 55912	1(507) 434-2863
Recreational Center	501 4th Ave NE, Austin, MN 55912	1(507) 433-1804
Mower County Snap Office (HHS)	201 1st St NE suite 18, Austin, MN 55912	1(507) 437-9701
Mower Council for the Handicapped	2103 14th St NE Suite A, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-9609
United Way of Mower County	111 Main St N Austin, MN 55912	15074372313
CLUES	111 Main St N Austin, MN 55912	507-355-2575
University of Minnesota Extension	1105 1/2 8th Avenue NE Austin, MN 55912	507-437-9552
Semcac	111 Main St N Austin, MN 55912	15074335889
Salvation Army	409 1st Ave NE Austin, MN 55912	15074374566

## 3. Emergency Shelters



Shelter	Address	Phone
Semcac	111 North Main #201, Austin, MN	(507) 433-5889
Salvation Army Church	409 1st Ave NE, Austin, MN	(507) 437-4566
Catholic Charities Austin	430 10th St NE #3, Austin, MN	(507) 433-9120

### Additional Shelters Near Mower

Shelters Nearby	Address	Phone
Catholic Charities Austin	430 10th St NE #3, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-9120
Semcac	111 North Main #201, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-5889
Salvation Army Church	409 1st Ave NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-4566
Rochester Dorothy Day House	703 1st St SW, Rochester, MN 55902	507-282-5172
Rochester Women's Shelter	151 4th St SE, Rochester, MN 55904	507-285-1010
Owatonna Hospitality House for Men	250 East Main Streetm Owatonna, MN 55060	507-444-4042
Mankato Connections Shelter	220 E Hickory St, Mankato, MN 56001	507-995-4952
Mankato Salvation Army Men's Shelter	700 S Riverfront Dr, Mankato, MN 56001	507-345-7840
Bethlehem Inn	400 2nd Ave NW, Waseca, MN 56093	507-833-8310
Rachel's Light	PO Box 118: Owatonna, MN 55060	507-451-1584
Ruth's House	124 1st Ave SW, Faribault, MN 55021	507-332-2236
Five Sisters Project	132 S Broadway, Wells, MN 56097	507-553-6207
VonWald Youth Shelter	236 Clifton Ave, Minneapolis, MN 55403	507-280-0110
Doc's Recovery House	1821 Restoration Rd SW, Rochester, MN 55902	507-216-3353

## 4. Senior Centers



Senior Centers	Longitude	Latitude	Type	Street	Phone
Mower County Senior Center	-92.97054133	43.6689549	Senior Citizen Center	400 3rd Ave NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-2370
Semcac Senior Center	-93.30061124	43.87219497	Senior Citizen Dining	507 2nd Ave, Ellendale, MN 56026	(507) 684-3311
Good Samaritan Society - Comforcare	-92.95076769	43.67650424	Rehabilitation Center	1201 17th St NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-4526

## 5. Walkable Grocery Range



Locations	Grocery Store	Longitude	Latitude	Address	Phone Number
1	Hy-Vee Grocery Store	-92.99093318	43.68387168	1307 18th Ave NW, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-7625
2	ALDI	-92.9962355	43.68341675	1700 17th St NW, Austin, MN 55912	(855) 955-2534
3	K'Nyaw Food Market	-92.97574203	43.67023723	404 1st St NW, Austin, MN 55912	(612) 274-3265
4	Knauers Food Market	-92.97574203	43.67023723	121 1st Ave NW #210, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-2575
5	Heimer Foods	-92.71877249	43.57758817	23 4th St NW, Adams, MN 55909	(507) 582-3301
6	Main Street Market Place	-92.50556034	43.51956152	108 W Main St, Le Roy, MN 55951	(507) 324-5380
7	Jim's Marketplace	-92.95973304	43.66835176	301 11th St NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 433-1028
8	Grand Meadow Market	-92.57252412	43.70593503	105 Grand Ave E, Grand Meadow, MN 55936	(507) 754-5112
9	Walmart Super Center	-92.98732986	43.6878262	1000 18th Ave NW, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 434-8159
10	Shwe Nyiko Market and	-92.97541557	43.66646933	103 W Oakland Ave, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 437-0933
11	Vandal's Family Market	-93.04814255	43.86477624	237 Hwy Ave S, Blooming Prairie, MN 55917	(507) 583-6671
12	Sunshine Foods	-92.39730706	43.69931371	501 N Park Dr, Spring Valley, MN 55975	(507) 346-2804
13	Heidi's Corner	-92.83111964	43.60330558	100 Main St SE, Rose Creek, MN 55970	(507) 437-1413
14	Asian Market	-92.98635761	43.66608901	209 11th St NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 396-2626
15	Unity Asian Grocery	-92.99023888	43.685897	1300 18th Ave NW Suite C, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 509-9012
16	Sudanese Community	-92.97638408	43.67011265	501 1st St NW, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 355-2275
17	Loikaw21	-92.95982594	43.66803488	209 11th St NE, Austin, MN 55912	(507) 396-2626

## 6. Data by Zip Code

Zip Code	Total Population	# Food Insecure	% Food Insecure	% in Poverty	% Black	% Hispanic	% Homeowners	% Disabled	Unemployment Rate	Median Income
55909	1,508	60	4.3%	4.8%	0.1%	3.6%	87.7%	9.5%	4.5%	\$75,670
55912	28,658	2,420	8.5%	15.4%	6.0%	15.6%	68.1%	11.6%	3.5%	\$50,998
55917	3,626	180	4.8%	8.7%	0.2%	8.0%	86.2%	10.1%	2.8%	\$66,250
55918	926	40	4.0%	7.0%	0.1%	6.2%	87.7%	10.0%	2.2%	\$62,679
55926	823	50	6.5%	11.5%	0.0%	0.1%	72.0%	10.6%	1.5%	\$83,000
55936	1,914	110	5.7%	10.4%	1.4%	2.9%	80.3%	11.8%	1.4%	\$63,237
55940	2,744	150	5.3%	5.6%	0.4%	1.5%	70.0%	9.8%	3.0%	\$60,000
55951	1,579	80	4.8%	7.1%	2.1%	2.4%	75.6%	12.5%	0.7%	\$51,522
55953	832	100	11.5%	22.4%	6.0%	2.9%	79.9%	10.7%	5.5%	\$47,176
55961	501	30	5.8%	12.4%	0.0%	7.6%	88.0%	11.0%	2.2%	\$72,708
55967	1,192	20	2.1%	5.6%	0.7%	0.8%	91.6%	6.8%	1.0%	\$84,821
55970	1,161	40	3.2%	5.0%	0.4%	3.4%	84.4%	11.3%	1.0%	\$72,361
55975	4,475	230	5.2%	5.4%	0.5%	0.3%	83.0%	11.8%	4.0%	\$64,659
55976	7,948	220	2.8%	5.4%	0.2%	1.3%	84.2%	7.0%	1.4%	\$79,695

## G. FAQ

### How do you apply for SNAP?

You can usually apply online through your state's government website. Minnesota's website offers an [online application](#) and a [printable application](#).

### How do I know if I am eligible for SNAP benefits?

Nationally, people with gross income up to 130% of the federal poverty guideline (FPG) may be eligible for SNAP. But various states offer benefits to those beyond 130%, including Minnesota which offers benefits to some with gross monthly income up to 200% of the FPG. You can review Minnesota's program details [on their website](#). There are asset limitations and deductions that can affect eligibility too. People are encouraged to apply even if they aren't sure whether they meet the income eligibility requirements.

HOUSEHOLD UNIT SIZE	INCOME LIMIT 130% of FPG	INCOME LIMIT 200% of FPG
1	\$1,473	\$2,265
2	\$1,984	\$3,052
3	\$2,495	\$3,838
4	\$3,007	\$4,625
5	\$3,518	\$5,412
6	\$4,029	\$6,198

### How much will I receive in SNAP benefits?

SNAP benefit amounts are calculated by taking a household's monthly net income\*, multiplying by 0.3, and subtracting the result from the maximum monthly allotment for your household size. Maximum monthly allotments per household are listed earlier in the report, but also updated in detail on the [USDA website](#).

\*Your net income is calculated by taking your gross income and subtracting deductions, to reflect the income that is not available for purchasing food. There are multiple deductions that can be taken into account including, standard deduction, income deduction, dependent care, child support, medical expenses, and more.



### **What causes food insecurity?**

Some leading causes of food insecurity are unemployment, poverty, and low income.

### **What determines if someone is food insecure?**

The USDA defines food insecurity as, “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” Food insecurity status is based on “responses to the full household food security survey module. The module includes a series of 10 items for households without children and 18 items for households with children.”<sup>8</sup> Check section 6c of the appendix to see a sample of the survey.

### **What is the best way to combat food insecurity?**

Federal, state and local programs go a long way to reducing food insecurity. SNAP is among the most helpful, helping millions of people every year. Local pantries and state assistance programs are also critical in supporting people when they are food insecure. Check out the food pantries highlighted in section 7a to learn more about the local resources in Mower County.

### **What are the best resources in Mower County?**

In Section 7 we list some of the most applicable food related resources in Mower County. Additionally, federal programs like SNAP offer some of the strongest support for food insecure people and households.

### **How do you know when a community is food secure?**

Annual food security statistics come from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) data, so comparing the annual survey data to earlier years will help show the trajectory of a community. Given various economic forces and dynamics, it may be impossible to reach 100% food security, but our goal is to find ways to reach and maintain a rate as close to that as possible.

### **How can I get involved in the Coalition, or donate?**

There are multiple ways to get involved with our coalition and keep up to date with our events and ongoing efforts:

- Sign up to receive coalition email updates or fill out the volunteer form through our website [www.hometownfoodsecurity.org](http://www.hometownfoodsecurity.org).
- Contact coalition lead, Molly Lanke, at [mlanke@uwmower.org](mailto:mlanke@uwmower.org).
- Email the coalition at [volunteer@hormelfoodsecurity.org](mailto:volunteer@hormelfoodsecurity.org).
- Follow us on social media via Facebook (Hometown Food Security Project) or Instagram ([@hometownfoodsecurityproject](https://www.instagram.com/hometownfoodsecurityproject))

### **We are working on creating a centralized way to donate,**

but in the meantime, the donation can be made to the various groups involved, including the United Way, The Salvation Army, Clues, Parenting Resource Center or Mower County Senior Center. Eventually, the Coalition might accept donations. Visit our website for the latest details.



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# **HOMETOWN**

## **FOOD SECURITY PROJECT**

MOWER COUNTY, MN



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