

Food Access in Milwaukee

**Prepared by Data You Can Use, in collaboration with
FoodCare: Milwaukee’s Food and Healthcare Coalition
Fall 2024**

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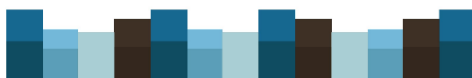
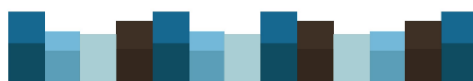


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*"The data I'm looking for is the reason **why**. We all know the numbers – we live them. Our question is: why? Our food insecurity comes from not having healthy food in the stores in our community, not having stores in our community, and the prices being so high in our community"– Data Chat participant*

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Introduction

Led by the Children’s Health Alliance of Wisconsin in partnership with several other community- and health-based organizations, the FoodCare Coalition aims to influence policy and practice that creates conditions for children in Wisconsin to thrive. The Coalition is working to create a replicable model of cross-sector cooperation that can be applied to a variety of sectors/issues. Our evaluation [[link](#)] of the partnership reveals the benefits of this type of collective impact collaboration for building relationships and trust among different actors and laying the groundwork for transformative action.

When individuals lack access to healthy food, their physical and mental well-being is diminished. Low-income households, households with children, and Black and Hispanic households disparately experience food insecurity. In 2022, the overall food insecurity rate¹ in Milwaukee County was 12.8% while the food insecurity rate among children was 26.8%. Furthermore, the food insecurity rate was 30% among Black individuals and 25% among Hispanic individuals [see: [Feeding America Map the Meal Gap](#)]. These vulnerable populations are at higher risk for the negative consequences that come from a lack of healthy food, such as reduced physical health, increased stress, and a lack of focus at work/school. Understanding the experiences of Milwaukee families working to provide healthy food and quality health care for their children will help guide the FoodCare Coalition in their efforts to create the conditions for these families to thrive.

About the data and data chats

Using data from Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services FoodShare: At a Glance Dashboard, several indicators across a variety of topics were selected to examine food access in Milwaukee. The indicators selected relate to food security, the cost of food access and other basic needs, and FoodShare benefits (See Appendix for all indicators as they were presented in the slides). Using a model of small, focused conversations called “[data chats](#)”, groups of about eight to fifteen individuals were convened by partner organizations that regularly work with families struggling with food insecurity in Milwaukee. Participants were compensated for their time and expertise.

The data chats provided an opportunity for participants to discuss how the data reflects their unique experiences and to consider possible solutions for issues that surfaced. In addition to capturing participants’ reflections about the quantitative data, participants shared their ideas about what trends aren’t highlighted in the data, and shared recommendations about how to further develop resources that successfully support families in Milwaukee, and to identify where change is needed.

¹ In this report and the data chats, we follow USDA’s definition of food security: “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable was (e.g. without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).

In September and October 2024, 35 individuals participated in three FoodCare Data Chats. This report highlights the main themes that emerged through these data chats. Data chat participants were all over 18 years old and represented a variety of ages and demographics, though participants' race or age was not explicitly requested or otherwise tracked.

About this report

This report identifies the themes that emerged during the data chats by sharing the stories and experiences of participants in their own words, while protecting their anonymity. The presentation materials used in the data chats include a slide deck and a script. The slides including the data are included as an appendix to this report. These materials were also shared as part of a follow up with partners, with the intention that they could replicate the process as other opportunities to distribute the data emerge.

Participating partners

Data You Can Use relies on community partners to connect us with opportunities to convene residents. We are grateful for the enthusiastic participation and support of our partners from the following organizations:

- Muskego Way Forward
- Rooted & Rising
- Milwaukee Food Council

Acknowledgements

Contributions to this report were provided by Data You Can Use staff: Amanda Beavin and Victor Amaya.

A special thank you to Elizabeth Ramirez, Alison Henderson, Adrian Spencer, Leah Laven-Wilson, Solana Patterson-Ramos, and Jessica Thompson for their coordination and support in bringing together extraordinary data chat participants.

For more information about this report, contact Amanda Beavin at amanda@datayoucanuse.org.

Food Access in Milwaukee – Themes and Quotes

Milwaukeeans Experiencing Food Insecurity

The data shows **food insecurity rates** – or the percentage of the population that is experiencing food insecurity – have **declined overall in Milwaukee County** between 2017 and 2022. However, the **rates have risen sharply in recent years**, since the COVID-19 pandemic (**See Appendix, Slides 1 and 2**).

- “The federal government had more money to supplement food and provide funding to schools [during the pandemic].”
- “[During the pandemic], there was fresh food you could get at any point. It was more available. You can’t hardly find fresh food anymore.”
- “There are just no more resources in general. If There is, who wants to stand in long lines?”

According to the data, **food insecurity rates differ across age and racial groups**. Since 2017, the **food insecurity rate among children has been consistently higher** than among the population as a whole. Furthermore, the **Black and Latino communities are facing higher rates of food insecurity** than the white, non-Hispanic population (**See Appendix, Slide 3**).

- “Lack of support for healthy meals in schools is a factor. The education component and accessibility is not adequate.”
- “[White people] have three times the amount of stores in their neighborhoods - *their* stores.”
- “There has always been a disparity, even before COVID. Where can you find a Chipotle in a Black neighborhood? Or a Corner Bakery?”
- “With the kids, when I was growing up, we had places we were able to go and eat after school. We had those programs, but now today we don’t really get that.”

Barriers to a Healthy Diet

The data shows that individuals enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) experience **numerous challenges in accessing a healthy diet**, including affordability of healthy food, lack of time and skill to cook healthy meals, and access to grocery stores (**See Appendix, Slide 5**). Participants noted that inflation has made affording fresh, healthy food hard for all families, as well as a lack of knowledge about how to budget for, meal prep, and cook nutritious meals.

- “It is cheaper to eat processed food than to make it from scratch. As a single parent, going to the store and having to pay \$8 for a head of cabbage is hard. It is easier to buy hotdogs and things like that.”

- “Even if people are doing right with what they have, there aren’t enough resources. A parent can be so overworked when they get home that they don’t feel like cooking.”
- “When it comes down to it, even if you go to the food store with food stamps, people aren’t taught to budget. We have to be taught how to use coupons, shop the deals.”
- “It’s education, on how to budget, make those meals you need to make, how to cook, etc. Make something that will stretch, not just today’s meals but tomorrow’s.”
- “Enough people don’t plan their meals because I have gone to the grocery store and bought a ton of food and got home and haven’t been able to make one meal.”
- “I didn’t learn how to cook or grocery shop until I was an adult.”
- “Healthy food is more expensive. In order for there to be enough for all, people tend to buy the cheaper products and get more food. Even more so when they have a big family. In lots of stores, what is healthy is rarely on sale. There are more deals on bread, for example, which is usually the lowest quality.”
- “One goes to the store for three little bags and it’s already \$100, and especially if only your husband works, you can’t really purchase items that are to your liking and healthy.”
- “As someone that has a food intolerance, it is difficult to buy alternatives to certain foods because they are even higher [in cost].”

Cost of Food Access

The **average cost of a meal increased** \$1.30 between 2017 and 2022, according to the data. As a result, more money is needed now than in recent years to ensure every family experiencing food insecurity in Milwaukee can purchase enough food to meet their needs (**See Appendix, Slides 6 and 7**).

- “I was taught to buy bigger portions growing up, but since the pandemic, I can’t afford that. I go to the food pantry for the side portions, but the beans are loaded with sodium which is still bad for my family.”
- “The economy is expensive. We can’t purchase more than eggs and beans and I can’t go out to eat at a restaurant. Last time we went, it was \$300 and my daughter said, ‘Mom, I’ll give you \$20’ and of course I accepted as I didn’t imagine that it would be that much!”
- “People cannot afford food and the increase in prices. Although there is an increased in the amount of the FoodShare you get, the prices of food at the store are greater than what we are getting.”
- “[Prices] are increasing. I cannot even buy grapes or oranges. Corn bread in my home is now being made without eggs to be able to make it.”
- “Corporate greed is a true problem. Grocery [stores] say that they are going to have cheaper prices, but that is not accurate. There is no regulation and it is a huge problem.”
- “The government needs to put policies in place to prevent the prices from going up so much.”

Cost of Other Basic Needs

The data shows that families who are struggling to afford food also **face higher healthcare costs and often struggle to afford other basic needs** like rent and medicine (See Appendix, Slides 8 and 9). Participants shared that they often must **choose between purchasing food and affording other basic needs (See Appendix, Slides 8 and 9).**

- "I work in the healthcare field, and I hear a lot of patients tell me that the doctor tells them they need to change the way they are eating, but they tell me they can either change the way they eat or they can stop taking their medication. Either way, their health is not gonna get better."
- "There is always a choice between one or the other - Food or medicine, food or housing, etc. There is always a choice when you live in this neighborhood in this area of Milwaukee."
- "This year, I'm either gonna pay \$900 for health insurance, or I can put that back into my house for groceries. I carry one year of health insurance, and then I don't carry one year and hope to God nothing happens. You have to make these types of decision just to have food on the table."
- "The rent prices are exaggeratedly high, not that our neighborhood is all that, but it should be fair and based on the mobility and accessibility that we have. Almost half of earnings go to rent, electricity costs, insurance, and, in the end, trying to manage every cent so that it's enough. High costs for health care equally, as well as medicine prices, allergies, and everything else."
- "It sounds like this is a plan... There has always been food insecurity in our community. We pay more than any other race in the country for food, gas. This is not new. It's a way to keep a group of people in poverty. If we are so stressed because of the insecurity, how are you going to teach your children how to eat healthy? How to budget? In reality, no matter how much you budget, it's never going to be enough."

FoodShare Benefits

The data shows that the number of **households enrolled in FoodShare in Milwaukee County has decreased** in recent years but **remains higher than pre-pandemic totals**. In addition, the data shows the percentage of first-time recipients among the households enrolled in FoodShare has declined and the average monthly allotment has increased by about \$100 since 2017 (**See Appendix, Slides 10, 11, and 12**).

- "I think it's because people are afraid to go back to work. If they couldn't work from home, they didn't go. So, they applied for benefits."
- "Inflation! Things are high. You might be at work... I need food stamps, I just don't qualify. The food prices are high."

- "You have to think about how many jobs are really out there. They say there are a lot of jobs, but you apply for them and you don't get them. The unemployment number is rising."
- "My daughter just applied for FoodShare. She had two jobs, in order to pay for rent and gas... and she was denied because she made \$20 over the limit and that is not fair. But, also it makes people not want to even try and apply."
- "Food stamps went up. The government made you go back to work, gave us at least \$15 per hour, but the prices went up, the childcare is up, gas and transportation is up. You cannot live off of food stamps but going to work is also not enough."
- "If we're even \$20 or \$50 over the income line where one may qualify, we won't qualify and this is reflected in food stamps, health and everything that a person like myself who is alone and retired and doesn't qualify."

Physical and Mental Health Consequences

Families in Milwaukee face a multitude of challenges when attempting to access and consume fresh, nutritious food - increased food prices; lack of time and knowledge to prepare healthy meals; disparities in grocery store access; declining government and community resources; as well as rising costs of housing, healthcare, and other basic needs. Participants felt that the physical and mental health consequences of the lack of access to healthy food were not reflected in the data shared during the data chat, especially for children.

- "Developing malnourishment. Food affects everything and it is one of the bigger issues in Milwaukee."
- "Struggles that kids have in school when they don't have access to food. Whether it's before or after school... kids be acting up because they are hungry. They can't focus or behave when they are hungry."
- "Eating ultra processed food is truly affecting our communities, but that is all they have. Cancer, obesity, etc. It is crucial to have access to good food and good prices."
- "Dealing with food insecurity as a child, not having healthy food, really messed with my mind. Now, I see it with youth in Milwaukee that are also experiencing food insecurity in school. I went to school just to eat, because otherwise we didn't have enough. Children have a hard time concentrating due to this."
- "And then the health of people gets worse... cancer is going up, especially in young people. Some of the pesticides that they have been using for decades are affecting families. So, even the food that we put in front of them is harming them, and this food is supposed to be healthy."
- "Also, an increase in colon cancer in young people because of the lack of fiber in the diet because of not eating vegetables."

What resources are needed in Milwaukee?

There are concerns about the reduction of resources for food access since the pandemic. Many of the participants highlighted the importance of **spreading awareness** about the resources that are currently available and **providing more education and training** so that participants would be less reliant on such resources. Some participants also noted **systems-level solutions** that can improve the lives of Milwaukee families.

Awareness and Coordination

- "We need to let people know that they need to apply for government programs."
- "Having food pantries in different days and hours."
- "Making sure to also not duplicate services - so organizing ourselves to provide better services and resources."
- "Larger organizations need to support communities - like there are "big mommas" that are doing this with their own backs. They need to support the work that is being done on the ground."
- "The idea of the food truck coming around, that would help people who don't have transportation."
- "Mobile clinics and the different amount of resources that Milwaukee has available. I don't think the media put their best food forward publicizing the information, so maybe we need to reach out to them."

Education and Training

- "More Food Leaders Labs."
- "Bring more knowledge and provide people with more education so that they know the resources and ways that they can take advantage of them while also applying it to their own lives. Even about basic skills, like writing a resume, getting a job, etc. Build capacity."
- "We have talked about the vacant lots in this area. If we could teach the residents how to purchase the vacant lots so they could have a community garden so we could grow our own fresh food and even some type of farming, like chickens."
- "Training on aquaponics / hydroponics, for indoor gardens."
- "Pickling training."
- "Training, cooking class for people - help people eat healthier if they know how to prepare the food."

Systemic Change

- "A lot of things would be solved if we could raise the minimum wage. It is the type of system issues that we need to start addressing."
- "We need more Bilingual people, language support."

Organizations highlighted as resources during the Data Chats

- [Mobile Market by Hunger Task Force and Piggly Wiggly](#)
- [Dream Team United WI](#)
- [Alice's Garden](#)
- [Tricklebee Cafe](#)
- [Mexic 103 Pay It Forward Board](#)
- [Community Task Force MKE / ComForce MKE](#)
- [Sun-Seeker MKE Collective](#)
- [Metcalf Park](#)
- [WestCare Wisconsin](#)
- [All Peoples Gathering Church](#)
- [Food Leaders Labs](#)
- [Rooted & Rising](#)
- [FoodShare Employment and Training \(FSET\)](#)
- [Next Door](#)

Highlights and Next Steps

As this report indicates, several themes and key issues were identified through the course of the three data chats. Overall, three key themes stand out: 1) Education & Training, 2) Economic Hardship, and 3) Equity & Access.

1. **Education & Training:** Participants in each of the three data chats brought up the want for more education and training to aid families with low incomes in Milwaukee in accessing and eating a healthy diet. On a systemic level, participants mentioned a need for technical job training, to secure stable jobs with higher incomes. On an individual basis, many participants mentioned a want to learn more about cost-saving techniques when shopping and ways to grow and preserve fresh, healthy food.
2. **Economic Hardship:** A primary concern mentioned in each of the data chats was the state of the economy, with rising food prices, rising costs of other basic needs, and a poor job market cited as reasons for low access to healthy food. Overall, participants felt that low wages and high prices were a root cause for food insecurity and poor nutrition in Milwaukee.
3. **Equity & Access:** Participants also noted that access to food was unequal across racial groups and neighborhoods. The difference in frequency between corner stores – more commonly located in lower-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods predominantly composed of residents of color – and larger grocery stores was mentioned often. Participants noted that corner stores tend to have higher prices, so paychecks and food stamps did not stretch as far. However, due to time constraints and lack of access to transportation, many individuals cannot access the more affordable grocery stores.

These findings suggest several recommendations going forward. Primarily, continued community-engagement efforts should be pursued by the FoodCare Coalition, particularly around the specific strategies the Coalition is pursuing or is considering pursuing to address food insecurity in the food and healthcare sectors. Furthermore, this report and these

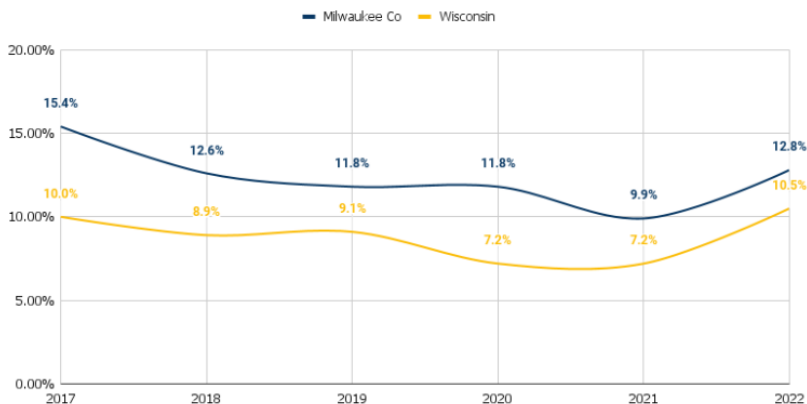
findings will be shared with the members of the FoodCare Coalition and the community to aid in discussions about future strategies and next steps. Finally, the FoodCare Coalition should continue to identify other partners who are working in these areas who could aid in developing additional strategies and solutions.

Appendix

Slide 1.

Food Insecurity

Percent of the Population that is Food Insecure in Wisconsin and Milwaukee County



- Food insecurity is defined as the **lack of access**, at times, **to enough food for an active, healthy life**.

- The **food insecurity rate is higher in Milwaukee County compared to the entire state of Wisconsin**

- **Overall, since 2017, food insecurity rates in Milwaukee County have decreased.**

- The food insecurity rate **increased nearly 3% between 2021 and 2022.**

Source: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, Milwaukee County and Wisconsin, 2017 – 2022, Overall

Slide 2.

2-1-1 Requests for Food Resources

January - December 2022

August 2023 - July 2024

12,509

21,436

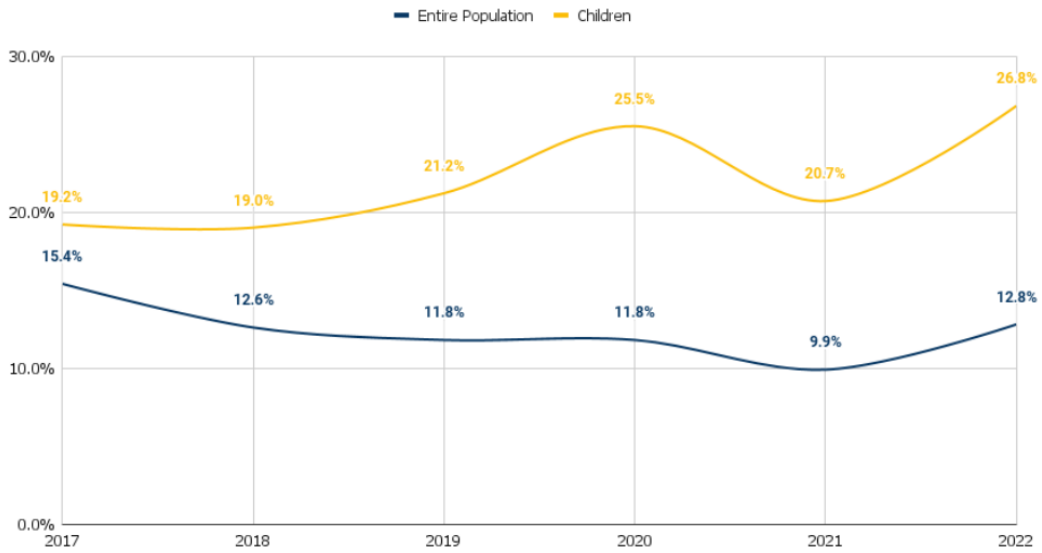
9.5% of All Calls

16% of All Calls

Source: [IMPACT 2-1-1](#)

Slide 3.

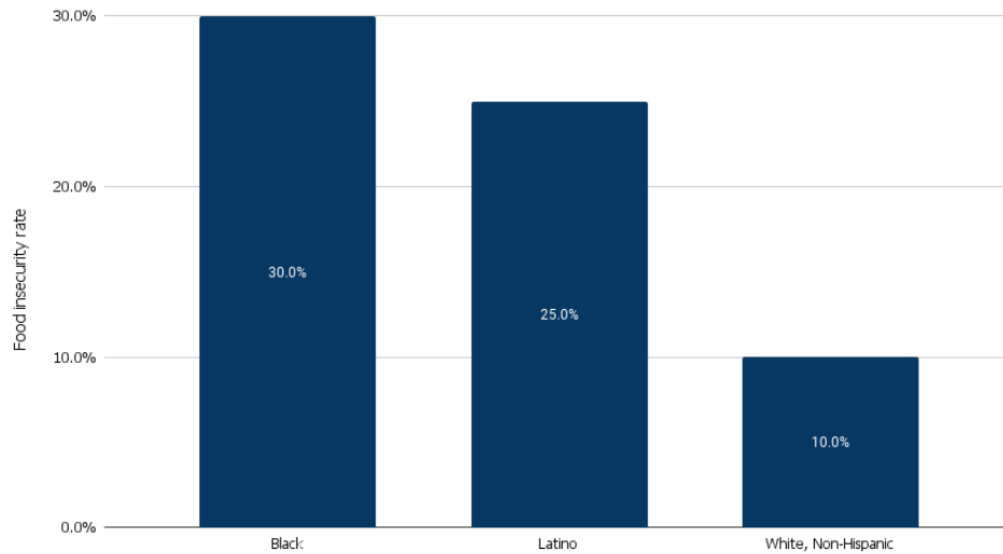
Food Insecurity Rate in Milwaukee County



Source: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, Milwaukee County, 2017-2022, Overall and Child

Slide 4.

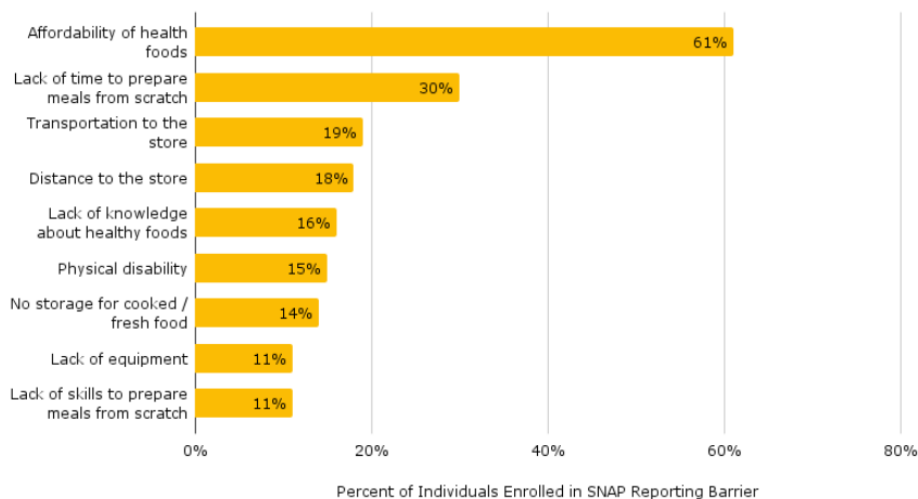
Food Insecurity in Milwaukee County, WI by Race - 2022



Source: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, Milwaukee County, 2022, Black, Latino, and White, Non-Hispanic

Slide 5.

Barriers Individuals Enrolled in SNAP Face in Achieving a Healthy Diet (2012)

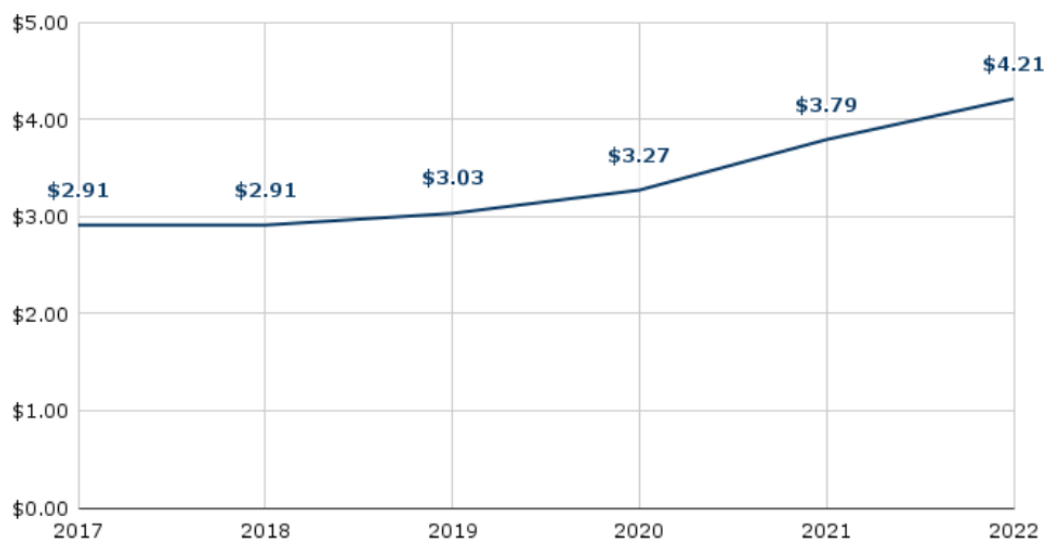


In 2012, **88% of SNAP recipients reported one of more barriers** preventing them from achieving a healthy diet throughout the month

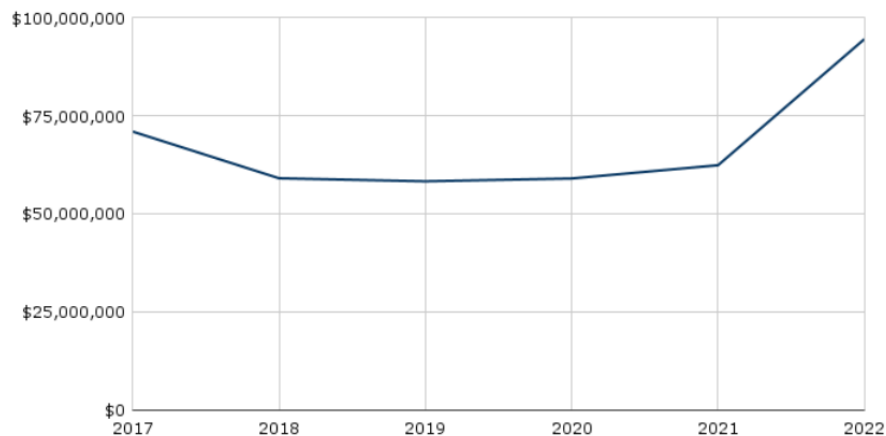
Source: [Barriers that Constrain the Adequacy of SNAP Allotments](#), USDA, 2012

Slide 6.

Average Meal Cost in Milwaukee County



Source: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, Milwaukee County, 2017-2022, Overall

Slide 7.**Annual Food Budget Shortfall in Milwaukee County**

On average, since 2017, an **additional \$67,332,500** is needed every year to ensure the population facing food insecurity in Milwaukee County can purchase enough food to meet their needs.

Source: Feeding America Map the Meal Gap, Milwaukee County, 2017-2022, Overall

Slide 8.

Compounding Effects related to health costs

\$160 Billion

the estimated total of direct and indirect **health-related costs of hunger and food insecurity in the US** in 2014

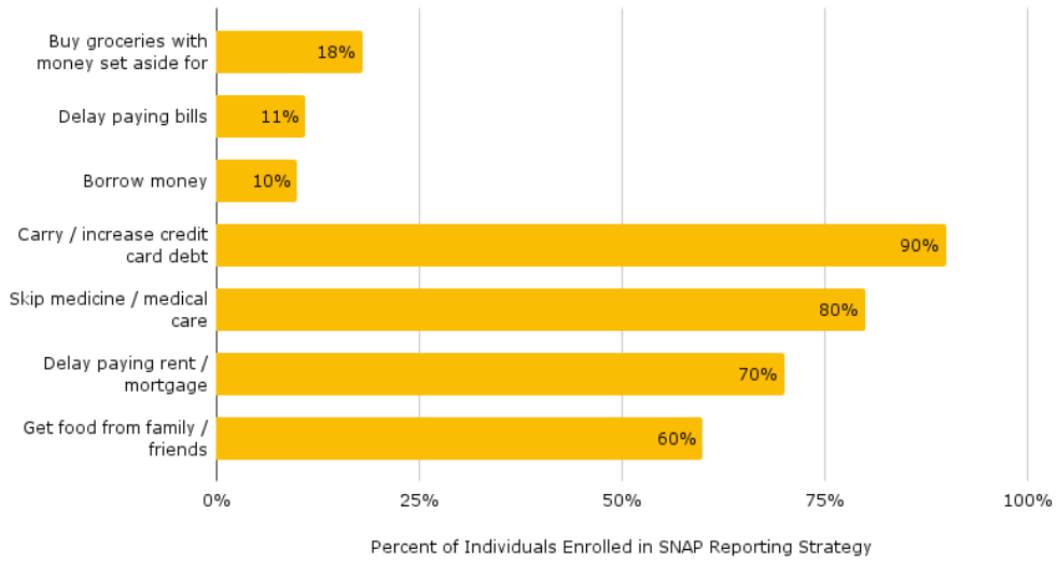
\$2,500

the **estimated annual healthcare costs paid by families experiencing food-insecurity** in 2016, which was 20% higher than families with sufficient food access.

Source: Hunger & Health: Impact of Poverty, Food Security, and Poor Nutrition, Food Research & Action Council, 2017; [Going Hungry in the USA: The innumerable Cost of Food Insecurity](#), RTI Health Advance, 2023.

Slide 9.

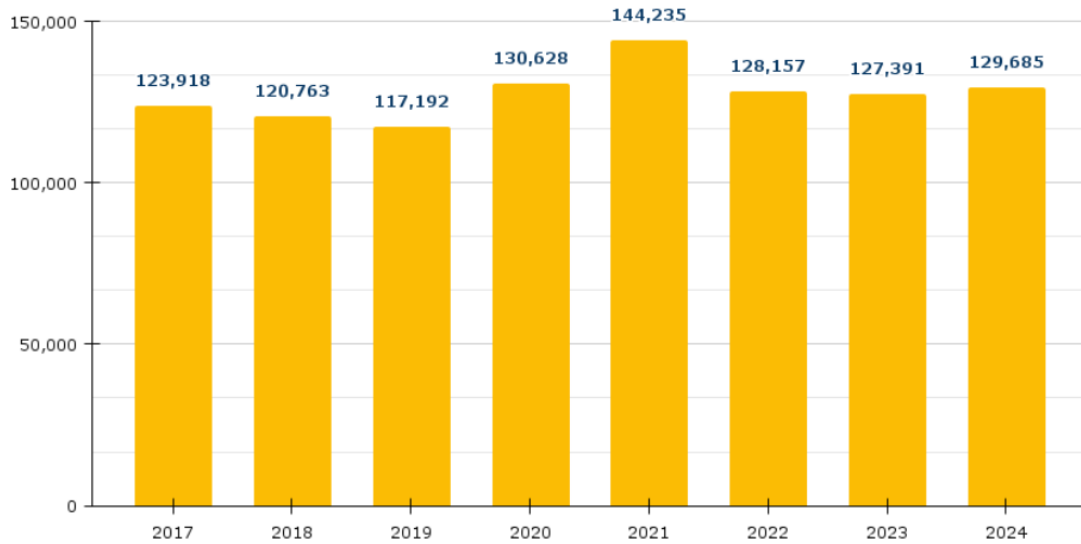
Coping Strategies Used by Individuals Enrolled in SNAP (2012)



Source: [Barriers that Constrain the Adequacy of SNAP Allotments](#), USDA, 2012

Slide 10.

Households who Received FoodShare Benefits in Milwaukee County

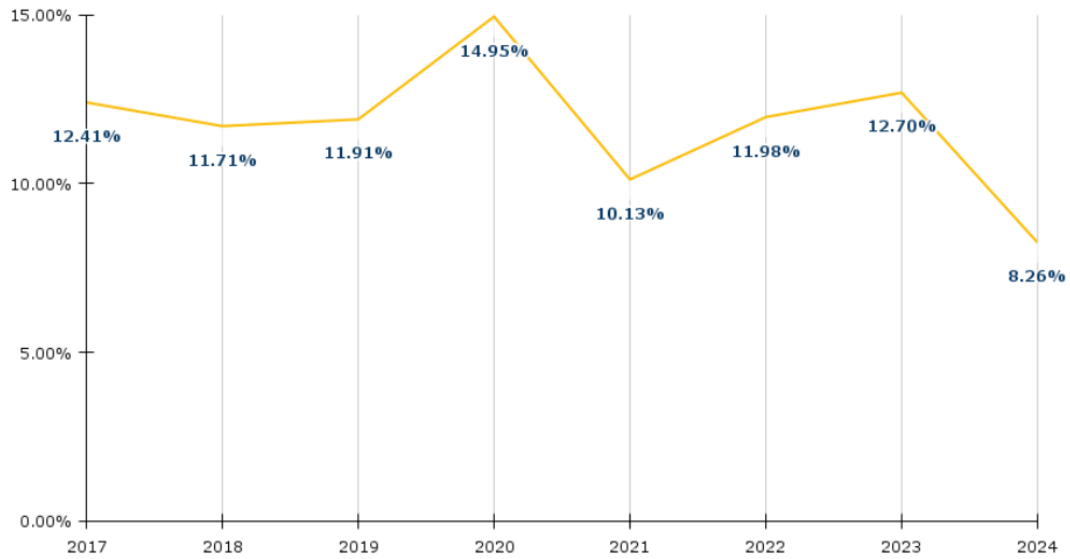


*2024 Data as of August 23rd, 2024

Source: WI Department of Health Services, FoodShare: At a Glance Dashboard, <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/foodshare/5year.htm>

Slide 11.

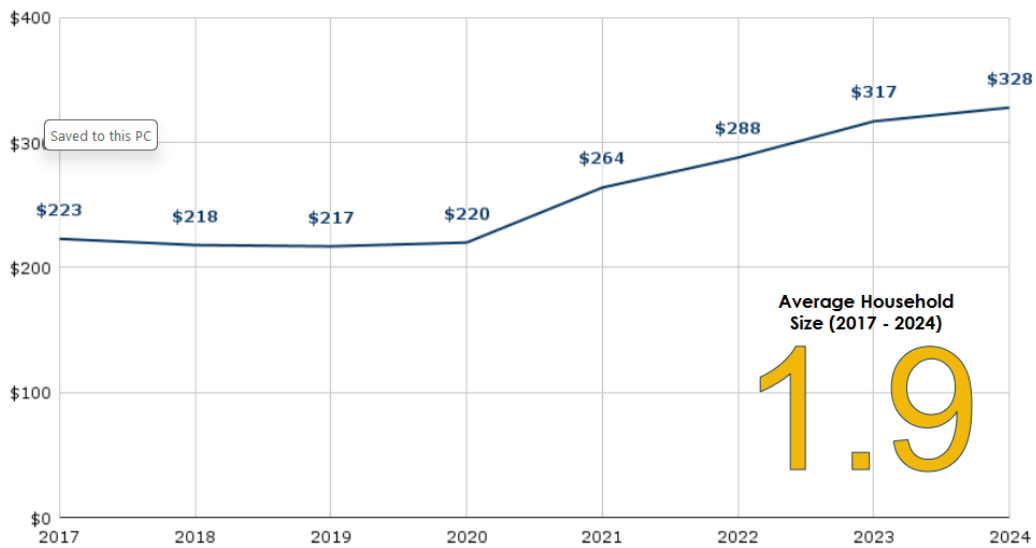
Share of Recipient Households who were First Time Participants



Source: WI Department of Health Services, FoodShare: At a Glance Dashboard, <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/foodshare/5year.htm>

Slide 12.

Average FoodShare Allotment Per Household in Milwaukee County



Source: WI Department of Health Services, FoodShare: At a Glance Dashboard, <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/foodshare/5year.htm>