



Franklin County Food Access Project

University of Vermont Honors College 86 B | Spring 2020 | C. Morse

A service learning research project conducted by first year UVM Honors College students in partnership with Grand Isle Franklin Community Action and the Northwest Regional Planning Commission in St Albans, Vermont

Franklin County Food Access Survey Findings

Patrick Flaherty, Eamon Caffrey, Lucia Possehl, Cheryl Morse

Summary

This report summarizes findings from a food access survey conducted in Franklin County, Vermont, a mostly rural county with an estimated population of 49,401 residents (US Census, 2020). ***The goal of the survey was to collect data from people with food security and food insecurity in order to compare food access between the two groups.*** The survey was available in an on-line version and paper format. The survey ran for three weeks in March and April 2019 and received 541 responses. Of these respondents, just under half of the respondents self-identified as often or sometimes concerned about having enough food. The analysis identified several trends. As expected, respondents with food security named supermarkets and local markets in Franklin County as the primary sites for accessing their food. Respondents with food insecurity named supermarket and local markets along with food shelves as the primary food sources. People with food insecurity named cost of food, cost of gasoline, and lack of access to transportation as the largest barriers to getting sufficient food. Majorities of respondents with food insecurity stated they would prefer to get their food at supermarkets and at food shelves, raising important questions about the social role food shelves may play. Interestingly, nearly one-quarter of the respondents with the highest food insecurity stated they would like to obtain food from their own farm or garden, suggesting possible demand for community garden spaces and programming. The survey indicates a social divide between people with food security and those with food insecurity; people with food insecurity are far more likely to say **they know** others without enough food, than are people who are food secure.

Findings Highlights

- 94.2% of food secure respondents reported that they get food from local markets or supermarkets, whereas only 48.4% of respondents with highest food insecurity reported using local markets or supermarkets.
- Cost of food, cost of gas, and having too many bills to pay were listed as the key barriers to accessing enough food by respondents with the highest food insecurity.
- 66.67% of the most food insecure respondents report having children who rely on them for food or sometimes rely on them for food.
- 66.4% of respondents with the highest food insecurity said that they would prefer to get food from food shelves.

- More than one-quarter of respondents with food insecurity (26.2%) would like to get food from their own gardens, and just under one-quarter (24.6%) would like to access food directly from farmers or farmers' markets.
- Respondents with food security and those with food insecurity get their information from different sources.
- People with food insecurity are more likely than others to know someone else who is food insecure in Franklin County.

Methods

The goal of the survey was to collect data from people with food security and food insecurity in order to compare food access between the two groups. On-line surveys, designed in LimeSurvey, were distributed through social media posts and neighborhood list serves, namely organizational Facebook pages and Front Porch Forum. Paper surveys were distributed to local food shelves and senior meal sites. The survey ran for three weeks in March and April 2019 and received 541 responses. Of these respondents, just under half of the respondents (45.5%) self-identified as often or sometimes concerned about having enough food. The data from the paper survey were entered into the online results spreadsheet and then analyzed using SPSS 25, a statistical analysis package. Sample questions included: "where do you access your food?," "where would you prefer to access your food?," "what other resources do you use to get food?," and "where do you get the information you need?." The survey also collected information related to the need to feed children, age categories, and town of residence. The survey asked respondents to share ideas they had to improve food security in the county. The narrative data were analyzed by hand coding.

Background

Food insecurity is one of the largest problems facing America today. Rurality may contribute to food insecurity. A study from a rural area in southern Illinois found that poverty coupled with the difficulty and time cost of traveling to affordable stores made it extremely difficult for many people to access sufficient and healthy food (1). Franklin County is a largely rural place. According to the US Census, about 11% of Franklin County residents live in poverty. The county has one small city, St Albans, that has two large supermarkets. The remainder of the county's towns are served by small supermarkets, local markets, general stores and convenience stores, and some have no food stores. With long distances between homes and food sources, we aimed to learn what kinds of barriers residents may encounter.

Food insecurity can have an especially devastating effect on families with children. Our study found that over half of the most food insecure respondents reported having children who sometimes or always rely on them for food. This can create additional cost, time, and stress barriers for low income parents. An article titled "Children's Experiences of Food Insecurity Can Assist in Understanding Its Effect on Their Well-Being" found that food insecurity directly results in mental health problems and worsened behavior of children (2)

Research Participants

The survey respondents were all adults over the age of 18 who live in Franklin County. A total of 541 surveys were collected; 327 (60.4%) were taken online and 214 (39.6%) were completed on paper.

It is important to note that the paper surveys were distributed at food shelves around Franklin County. We distributed surveys at these locations because we aimed to receive responses from residents who are food secure and those who are food insecure so that we could compare them with statistical analyses. We gathered 247 responses (45.5% of all respondents) from people who report often or sometimes worrying about having enough food within the last year. Even though a wide age range of adults took these surveys, the largest age group to fill out the survey were those between the age of 45-65 years old. The surveys covered a total of 14 towns within Franklin County. St. Albans, and response rates from each town roughly matched their relative populations. St Albans City and Town (with a combined population of 13,163) was the most represented in the survey.

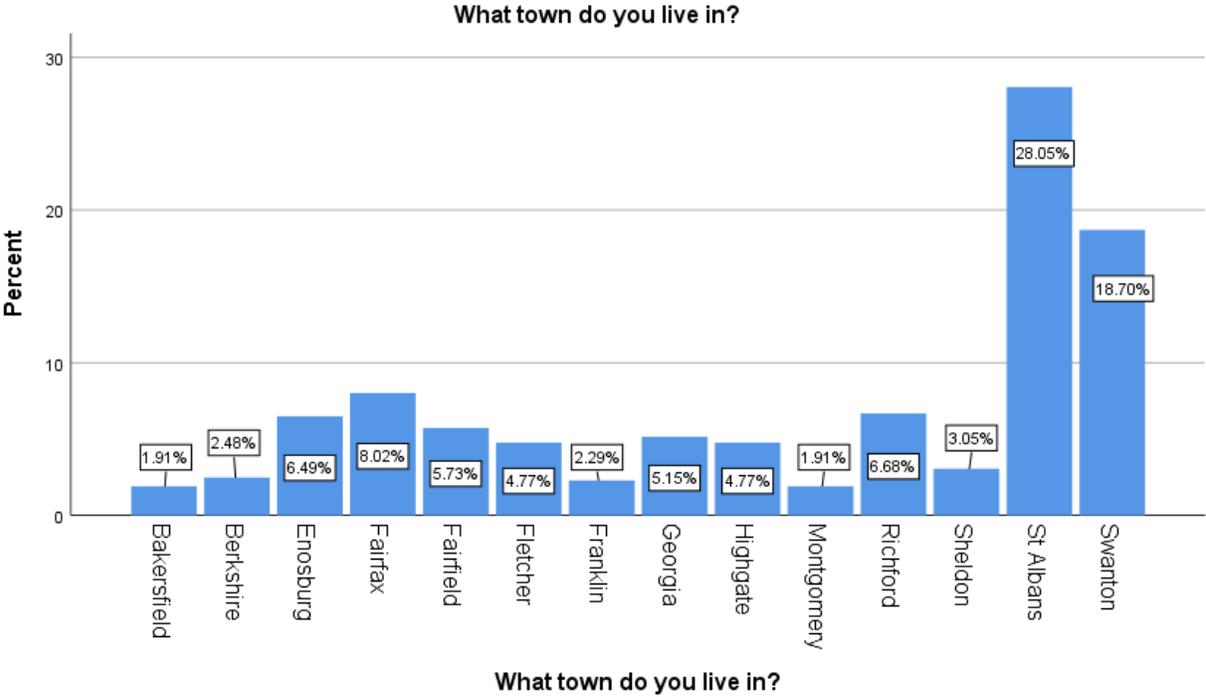


Figure 1. Percent of survey respondents by town of residence in Franklin County.

Food Security and Food Insecurity Definitions

Survey respondents were asked how often they worried about having enough money to purchase food in the last twelve months and the option to answer: never, often, sometimes, or no answer. For this analysis, people who answered “never” or did not answer the question are identified as “people with food security.” Respondents who said they sometimes or often worried about having enough money to purchase food are labelled as “people with food insecurity.” Portions of this analysis focus only on respondents who answered “often;” this group is referred to as “people with the highest food insecurity.”

Findings

Very Different Ways to Access Food and Different Food Access Preferences

Food Source	Percent of all Food Secure Respondents	Percent of all Food Insecure Respondents	Percent of Respondents with High Food Insecurity	Where Respondents with Highest Food Insecurity Would Prefer to Access Food
Local markets or supermarkets *	94.2	71.5	59.3	48.4
Grocery store outside of Franklin County *	47.5	18.3	13.0	10.7
Farmers market, Farm stands, or CSA*	54.9	26.8	16.3	24.6
Family or Friends or Neighbors (no diff)	13.6	15.9	13.8	7.4
Fast food restaurants *	22.0	13.0	11.4	3.3
Community meals*	5.4	10.2	9.8	9.8
Food delivery to my home (on-line service) *	7.8	3.3	1.6	8.2
Convenience store (no difference)	22.0	18.3	13.0	9.0
My own garden/farm*	50.8	20.3	7.3	26.2
Church/faith organizations*	1.4	8.9	10.6	9.8
Restaurants*	58.3	17.9	7.3	6.6
Meals on Wheels	1.7	1.2	2.4	4.1
Food shelf*	8.8	69.1	88.6	66.4

Table 1. Where Respondents Access Food by Location, Preferred Food Source, and Food Security Status

The asterisk indicates statistically different responses between food secure and food insecure respondents, using a chi-square test with a p value of between 0.000 and 0.05.

Table 1 demonstrates important differences in food access and food access preference between those with food security and those with food insecurity. People with food security are more likely to buy their food in local or large supermarkets in Franklin County, and are more likely to shop outside of Franklin County for their food. They are also more likely to access food directly from farmers, either from buying at farmers' markets, at a farm, or through a Community Supported Agriculture share. They are more likely than respondents with food insecurity to grow their own food (53.1% compared to 20.6% of food insecure respondents). Respondents with food security are also more likely to eat at fast food restaurants, and far more likely to eat at restaurants of all kinds. Over 60% of food secure respondents reported eating at restaurants, compared to fewer than 18% of food insecure respondents.

People with the highest food insecurity are far less likely to access any food source other than those that offer free food: food shelves, Meals on Wheels, and church or faith organizations.

Additional Information from Respondents with Food Insecurity

Food Access Preferences: Gardens, Farms, and Food Shelves

Table 1 indicates a wide gap between where people with the highest food insecurity access their food now and where they would prefer to get their food. A small percentage of this group now access their food directly from farmers or from their own gardens, but a much larger percentage would *prefer* to get their food from these sources. This may indicate an area where food provision organizations could grow capacity through community gardens and gardening programs.

A majority of the respondents with highest food insecurity indicated they prefer to access their food from food shelves, in fact, this percentage is higher than a desire to purchase food from supermarkets or local markets. This presents an area for further research, and the other research projects in this study indicate that the positive social environment at food provisioning sites may be one factor to consider in future research.

More Than One Mouth to Feed

About half (48.4%) of all respondents to the survey indicated that they have children they are responsible for feeding at least sometimes. However, those with the highest food insecurity were the most likely to have children to feed (66.7%). This indicates a relationship between having children and food insecurity.

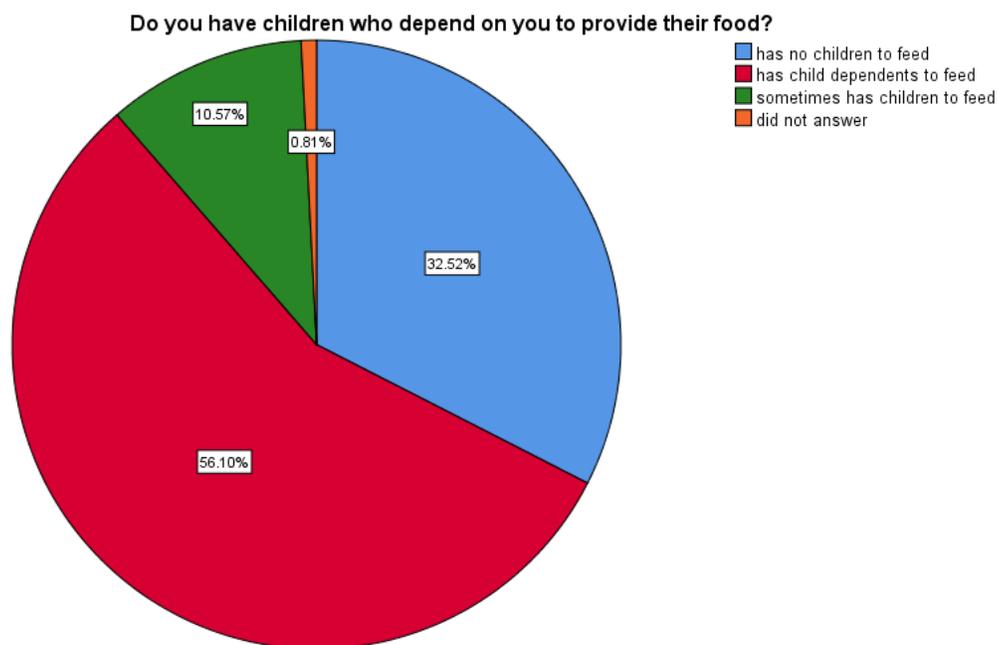


Figure 2. Percent of Respondents with Highest Food Security by Child Dependents to Feed

Use of Additional Food Resources

As expected, given that paper surveys were distributed at food shelves, a large majority of the respondents with highest food insecurity report access their food at food shelves. The second most frequently used resource is the 3 Squares VT / SNAP food program. Free school lunches are used by 20% of the respondents with highest food insecurity.

Food Access Resources	Percent of Respondents with Highest Food Insecurity
Food Shelf	91.9
Free School Lunches	19.9
WIC Program	4.9
Commodities	17.1
Faith and church organizations	12.2
3 Squares VT / SNAP	59.3
Farmers' markets coupons	12.2
Medicaid ride services	8.9
Do not use any of these resources	4.1

Table 2. Food Access Resources Used by Respondents with Highest Food Insecurity

When asked why they did *not* use some of the other food access resources listed in the survey, people with the highest food insecurity indicated several different reasons, none of which was named by more than 30% of respondents (it is important to note that more than half of the respondents with highest food insecurity did not answer this question). It was more likely for a person to indicate that they do not know if they qualify for resources, or that the resources were too complicated or hard to use than to say they do not want others to know they use such resources. As noted, this survey was distributed at food shelves where people were using food shelf resources, so perhaps that accounts for the relatively small number of people who seem to be concerned about stigma, but it is an area for future research.

Reasons for Not Using a Food Resource	Percent of all Respondents with Highest Food Insecurity
I do not need these resources	9.3
I do not know about these resources	18.5
I do not know if I am qualified for some of these resources	27.8
Others need these resources more than I do	16.7
I do not want people to see me or know that I am using these resources	22.2
They are too complicated or hard to use	25.9

Table 3. Reasons for Not Using Food Resources as Reported by Respondents with Highest Food Insecurity

Economic Barriers to Accessing Food

Respondents with food insecurity report multiple, mainly economic barriers to accessing food. Only “food costs too much” was cited by over half of the respondents. The other obstacles similarly point to the high cost of living: such as the price of gas, and the pressure to pay other bills. Almost one-quarter of respondents with food insecurity said they didn’t have transportation to access food sites.

Barrier to Accessing Food	Percent of Respondents with Food Insecurity
I don’t have transportation	23.3
Gas is too expensive	31.8
Food locations are not convenient	12.1
I don’t have time	5.8
Food costs too much	52.9
I have too many other expenses	43.5
I had an unexpected bill / expense that made it difficult to buy food for a short time	38.3

Table 4. Barriers to Accessing Food, According to Respondents with at Least Some Food Insecurity

Differences in Information Sources

The survey asked respondents to indicate where they get the reliable information they need to make decisions. Table 4 shows the results to that question by food security group. Over half of the people with food security said they get their information from on-line sources; only a quarter of people with food insecurity use online sources. Family and friends are an important source of information for both groups of people, as is word of mouth. The responses to this question suggest that those seeking to share information with people who are experiencing food insecurity need to identify creative and multiple off-line and non-traditional methods.

Information Source	Percent of Respondents with Food Security	Percent of Respondents with Food Insecurity
TV*	28.0	10.2
Radio*	20.7	10.6
Online *	54.8	25.4
Facebook*	29.2	18.8
Front Porch Forum*	32.5	10.6
VT 211*	5.5	10.6
Family and friends	50.2	55.9

Posters and flyers	18.1	12.7
Word of mouth	39.1	35.6
Doctor's office	17.0	16.6
Church or faith organization *	3.3	9.7
Newspaper *	13.2	6.4
Newsletter	1.1	1.3

Table 5: Where Respondents Access Information by Food Security Status

The asterisk indicates statistically different responses between food secure and food insecure respondents, using a chi-square test with a p value of between 0.000 and 0.05.

Divided Social Networks

The survey asked all respondents if they “personally know, or know of, someone in Franklin County who sometimes does not have enough to eat.” The results show that people with food insecurity are far more likely to know another person with food insecurity (64.6%) than are people who are food secure (49.2%). And, respondents with food security are far more likely to say they don’t know a person who has trouble getting enough food (23.7%) than people with food insecurity are (9.3%). This indicates that those who have enough money for food may occupy different social networks than those who experience food insecurity.

Analysis and Recommendations

The Problem with Super Markets and Food Shelves

The fact that 94.2% of food secure respondents to this survey report getting their food at local markets and supermarkets while only about 59.3% of people with high food insecurity report getting their food from those locations reveals a gap and a social problem. Supermarkets are the largest providers of food for the public, yet are inaccessible to half the population of people who experience the highest food insecurity in Franklin County. Food shelves fill an important role for this group of people. However, while food provisioning services offer essential alternatives, they may not have the capacity to meet all food and household item needs for food insecure people. Further, this creates two different worlds of food provisioning, one for the economically secure and another for others.

How Strong is Stigma Associated with Using Food Access Resources?

Most of the respondents with the highest food insecurity indicated they would prefer to get their food from a food shelf in the future. As noted, this could be because the survey was taken by users of food shelves and perhaps did not get responses from people experiencing food insecurity who do not use food shelves because of a fear of being seen using the source. However, indications from other research undertaken by our group suggests that food provisioning sites are welcoming, supportive and positive places that provide a sense of community for volunteers and clients alike. Qualitative research into how volunteers at and clients of Franklin County’s food shelves and food provisioning services could reveal

greater insight into the role of stigma or the absence of stigma and presence of community spirit may be playing at food sites.

Education and Awareness

The survey revealed that food insecure people are not fully aware of all resources available to them, may not understand how to access programs, or may not know if they qualify for services. As one respondent wrote, “more awareness for the shelf and maybe some awareness at supermarkets” about food resources could be helpful. Certainly, any steps that can be taken to simplify programs, aid people in filling out forms, and counseling people about available options is critically important, but as the survey also pointed out, determining how to reach people is an on-going challenge.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the people who completed this survey for their participation. Without their responses, there would be no study. We would also like to thank the people who help operate the resources trying to fight food insecurity and make food more accessible. They are an essential part of their community, and their work is greatly appreciated by many. Thanks to Robert Ostermeyer at Community Action and Emily Klofft at Northwest Regional Planning Commission for their support. Lucia Possehl created the barn swallow artwork for this report.

References

1. Carnahan, L. R., Zimmermann, K., & Peacock, N. R. (2016). What Rural Women Want the Public Health Community to Know About Access to Healthful Food: A Qualitative Study, 2011. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 13. doi: 10.5888/pcd13.150583
2. Connell, C. L., et al. (2005). "Children's Experiences of Food Insecurity Can Assist in Understanding Its Effect on Their Well-Being." *The Journal of Nutrition* 135(7): 1683- 1690.
3. United States Census. (2020). Population Estimates for 2019 and 2018. Accessed April 9. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/franklincountyvermont>.