

Improving Food Security and Food Access in Arlington County, Virginia

Kassandra Martinchek, Theresa Anderson, Poonam Gupta, Fernando Hernandez, Alena Stern, and Amy Rogin

An estimated **7.8 percent of Arlington households experienced food insecurity** in 2019. Residents purchase groceries, use public benefits, and access free groceries and meals to meet their food needs.

Arlington County can help residents access affordable groceries by offering gas cards, public transit subsidies, and grocery gift cards; expanding SNAP outreach; and subsidizing or waiving grocery delivery fees for SNAP participants.

Arlington County can improve charitable food resources by opening sites in Crystal City, increasing food deliveries, offering nontraditional hours of service, and enhancing language and online access.

Arlington County can help residents balance the cost of food with other financial pressures by offsetting utility and housing costs, implementing matched savings or cash transfer programs, and ensuring affordable housing.

Household-level food insecurity and community-level food access reflect a family's ability to secure the necessary food to meet their needs. Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food. Community-level food access describes households' ability to reach needed food resources, such as grocery stores and charitable food sites. In Arlington County, Virginia, an estimated 7.8 percent of households experienced food insecurity in 2019. There was substantial variability across neighborhoods, ranging from an estimated 2 percent to nearly 15 percent of households.

This fact sheet provides a **high-level summary of food insecurity and access within Arlington County to understand the geographic distribution of food needs, how well existing programs and services meet those needs, how financial pressures impact food budgets, and barriers households face in accessing food resources**. See the full report by the same authors: *Improving Food Security and Access in Arlington County, Virginia: Mixed-Methods Analyses and Recommendations* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2022). We mapped locations of retail and charitable food sources against estimated food insecurity rates to understand the food landscape in Arlington. We fielded a survey to all residents of four neighborhoods with high estimated food insecurity rates to understand how residents used and experienced different resources. We also conducted 16 in-depth interviews to gather residents' input on the services they used and barriers they faced, and we obtained additional insights from the Arlington County Food Security Task Force.

FOOD SECURITY AND ACCESS IN ARLINGTON COUNTY

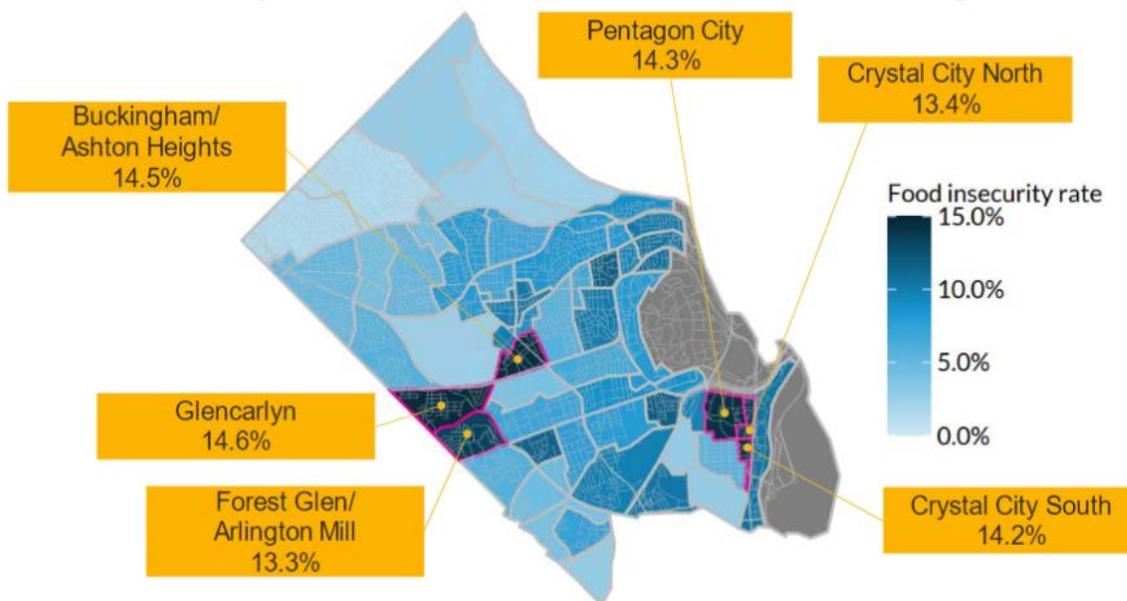
Geographic distribution and demographics of food insecurity. For Arlington County to assess the adequacy of supports, it is helpful to understand where families who are struggling to afford food live. Estimated food insecurity is concentrated in south and east Arlington County, especially the Glencarlyn, Forest Glen/Arlington Mill, Buckingham/Ashton Heights, Pentagon City, Crystal City South, and Crystal City North neighborhoods. We surveyed residents living in four neighborhoods with the highest food insecurity rates (from 13.3 to 14.6 percent) in the county and found that residents facing food insecurity were more likely to rent their homes and have low incomes, and 17 percent were Social Security beneficiaries, which suggests they are living on a fixed income.

Financial distress and food security. Food insecurity is a household economic condition, so it is crucial to contextualize food insecurity with other household-level economic challenges and pressures. To understand the challenges facing households experiencing food insecurity, we examined their financial circumstances. We found that households experiencing food insecurity and renters with low incomes had substantial difficulty paying expenses. Residents experiencing food insecurity often coped with financial emergencies by borrowing money from a friend or family member or paying unexpected costs off on their credit cards over time. They rarely had savings to draw from. Even using these strategies, 1 in 3 residents experiencing food insecurity would not be able to pay for an unexpected \$400 expense. Food budgets were often the first to be cut in times of financial hardship, and families made trade-offs between food and bills like rent and utilities when money was tight.

FIGURE 1

Food Insecurity Is Concentrated in South and East Arlington

Food insecurity rates among the top six census tracts in Arlington County



Source: Estimated food insecurity rates were provided by Craig Gundersen, PhD, advisor to this project and lead researcher on “Map the Meal Gap,” Feeding America, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2019/overall/virginia/county/arlington>. Data used to estimate food insecurity rates were sourced from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates.

Notes: We gray out 2 of the 59 tracts defined in the 2019 ACS estimates. Tract 510139801 is largely covered by the Arlington Cemetery and tract 510139802 by the DCA International Airport. Tracts outlined in magenta represent those with high estimated food insecurity rates.

Access to retail food. Households experiencing food insecurity may use a combination of their own money, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other benefits, and free groceries or meals to meet their food needs. Understanding Arlington County households’ ability to reach SNAP retailers provides insight into potential barriers to redeeming SNAP benefits or purchasing groceries. Most residents, especially those with high estimated food insecurity rates, had access to a SNAP retailer—a grocery store or other non-convenience store retail food outlet authorized to redeem SNAP benefits—within a 40 minutes of roundtrip travel time. This means that SNAP retailers were close to households in need and that transportation systems connected households adequately to retail food. Surveyed residents prioritized cost of groceries in deciding where to shop and reported challenges affording healthy and culturally appropriate food. Residents reported some challenges in paying for groceries, especially meat, as the cost of food increased 6.3 percent (and 14.8 percent for meat) between December 2020 and December 2021. Some residents

struggled with transportation in purchasing groceries, particularly those with mobility restrictions or without a car. Respondents experiencing food insecurity were more likely to walk, get a ride, or use the Metro than those who were food secure, who were more likely to own a car and drive. Few residents reported using online ordering and delivery of groceries, but those who did reported that it was crucial for them. Ordering groceries online particularly helped residents with mobility restrictions, though delivery fees could be high.

Access to free groceries and meals. Free groceries and meals are an important supplement for families experiencing food insecurity. Families for whom SNAP or other federal nutrition benefits are not fully adequate and families who do not qualify for federal nutrition programs may find charitable food resources particularly beneficial in meeting their food needs. About half of residents who were experiencing food insecurity at the time of the survey reported using free groceries or meals. Most residents surveyed who used these resources accessed free groceries or meals from one location one to three times each month. Most charitable food sites in Arlington County were open year-round, but fewer than half were open to all families in the county—they may have served children, seniors, or residents of a specific area. Fewer than 1 in 5 charitable food sites in the county (excluding child summer food program sites) offered weekly service and evening or weekend hours. The Crystal City and Pentagon City areas had relatively high estimated food insecurity rates compared with the rest of the county and low access to existing charitable food resources. Residents who accessed free groceries or meals reported satisfaction with services, but many wanted greater cultural appropriateness of the foods offered.

Households with children were at greater risk of food insecurity than households without children and faced challenges managing food budgets. Further, in the area near the DCA International Airport and Crystal City, few charitable food sites specifically targeted children, despite relatively high child poverty rates. Older adults (ages 65 and older) are relatively well-served by existing charitable programs in Arlington, although some residents reported mobility impairments that prevented them from traveling to food sites.

The cost of transportation, including public transportation and gas, may be a barrier to accessing free groceries and meals. Nearly 3 in 5 households surveyed that were not using charitable food resources reported they were not aware of charitable food resources. Residents experiencing food insecurity who did not access free groceries or meals reported they were not in need or did not want to receive charity. This suggests that pride or stigma may play an important role in whether residents feel comfortable accessing charitable food. Other residents experiencing food insecurity who did not use charitable food resources did not know where to access free groceries and meals. They reported that they expected few barriers in finding this information and would seek it out online, if needed.

Racial equity and food access. Food insecurity disproportionately affects Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian households. To develop a holistic approach to food equity and access, it is imperative to account for inequities produced by structural racism. Survey data show Black and Hispanic/Latinx respondents reported significantly higher rates of food insecurity than white respondents. Asian households with low incomes had to travel further to access charitable food sites relative to Black and Hispanic/Latinx households. The Crystal City neighborhood had a concentration of Asian residents with low incomes and low access to charitable food. Residents who were Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx with incomes below the poverty level were more geographically concentrated in Arlington County than white residents. Areas with higher shares of Black and Hispanic/Latinx households with low incomes had better charitable food access than areas with Asian and white households with low incomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING FOOD SECURITY

We found that Arlington County had many resources available for residents to meet their food needs. However, Arlington County residents reported cost pressures in purchasing food and balancing household finances and bills, especially during a period of rising inflation and housing costs. Some strategies the county could consider to **improve the retail food environment** include

- incentivizing affordable grocers that offer culturally appropriate food to open locations in neighborhoods with high food insecurity rates,
- offering gas cards or subsidized public transportation fares,
- expanding SNAP outreach,
- providing grocery gift cards, and
- subsidizing or waiving grocery delivery fees for SNAP participants.

In addition, free groceries and meals—which can be important supplements for households living with food insecurity—were not equitably distributed across the county. We highlighted opportunities for **improvements to charitable food options**, including

- opening additional sites in the Crystal City area to meet the needs of residents, with a focus on Asian residents with low incomes and children in households with low incomes,
- increasing food delivery options for residents with mobility challenges,
- removing or softening referral and/or identification requirements,
- expanding hours of operation to include evenings and weekends,
- offering protein boxes to families in need who do not qualify for existing assistance programs and increasing the amount of protein offered to residents currently using charitable food resources, and
- enhancing language access and online communication resources.

Finally, Arlington County could implement various **proactive strategies to ease financial pressures on Arlington County residents with few economic resources or minimal savings**, including

- offsetting or managing housing and utility costs,
- taking measures to maintain, develop, and protect affordable housing throughout the county,
- providing direct cash infusions to families, and
- implementing matched savings programs.

ADDITIONAL READING

Improving Food Security and Access in Arlington County, Virginia

Kassandra Martinchek, Theresa Anderson, Poonam Gupta, Fernando Hernandez, Alena Stern, and Amy Rogin
<https://urbn.is/3tV2ghc>

ABOUT THE STUDY DIRECTORS

Kassandra Martinchek

kmartinchek@urban.org

Martinchek is a research associate in the Center for Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. Their research focuses on food security and financial well-being.

Theresa Anderson, PhD

tanderson@urban.org

Anderson is a principal research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute and an expert on mixed-methods evaluation. She is also a resident of Arlington County.