

Community Donation Gardening Toolkit

Section 5: Community Food Security Primer

More than one in 10 Iowans experienced food insecurity annually between 2013 and 2015 (USDA ERS, 2016). ISU Extension and Outreach partners with communities and organizations working to provide Iowans with low food access and income with increased access to nutritious, locally produced food, and greater voice and participation in our state's community food systems.

Communities and organizations across our state are developing programs and tools to improve community food security, food access, and food justice through farmers markets, community donation gardens, food donation, food literacy programs, food pantries, and additional community food programs.

Community spotlight - Food bank employee in Iowa

"Ultimately we always need to remember it's people. People first and items later, and when you're talking about hungry people, they are people who, it's not for us to judge, life happens. The face of hunger is much different than maybe our judgments would like to be. I have seen, we have a generous community and wonderful people that do great work. However, ... I see people helping animals more than helping a hungry person, and that, because of the judgment that people may bring to that. We have to do it without judgment, and that every pantry, like I said, is set up differently and we work with them, but I think that most important thing to remember is that we're all human. We give food out once, but we eat three times a day."

Important Definitions

Community food security (as defined by Bradley & Herrera, 2016) refers to efforts to provide for the nutritional needs of community members experiencing food insecurity through community-based initiatives, emphasizing small-scale local food production. These efforts typically focus on establishing fairness and equity in the local food system, with attention to increasing access to fresh, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods. Community food security also seeks to place recipients of the food in positions of decision-making, governance, and ownership in their community food systems.

Food access refers to the ability of people to obtain fresh, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods through market and non-market sources. Non-market sources may include home production; food sharing; community gardens; community, school, and other meal programs; and emergency food sources. Challenges to food access at an individual level may include inadequate income, health problems and disability, limited time and resources to acquire

and prepare healthy foods, lack of access to a kitchen and food preparation equipment, and lack of land and other resources to grow/raise food. At a community-level challenges may include an absence of nearby retailers offering nutritious food ("food deserts"), poor public transportation and infrastructure, limited or no school meal programs (especially in the summer), and lack of community food spaces that include farm land, community gardens, farmers markets, edible landscapes, shared kitchens, community meal sites, food pantries, etc.



Household food insecurity (as defined by the USDA) is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Household food security (as defined by the USDA) means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Food justice, sovereignty, and equity are concepts that focus on efforts to define food as a basic human right. Programs and movements based on these concepts focus their efforts on building more inclusive agricultural and food systems, emphasizing marginalized communities' voices at local, national, and global levels of policy and practice. For full definitions and more information about these terms, see the ISU Extension and Outreach Local Foods webpage on [Inequities in the Food System](#).

Food insecurity – Causes

What contributes to food insecurity in Iowa and throughout the United States? For people experiencing food insecurity, there are a host of challenges to accessing fresh fruits, vegetables and other nutritious fresh food, especially locally produced food. Factors to consider include:

Supply and affordability

- Despite the growing number of local producers, Iowa still has relatively low acreage in fruits and vegetables to meet the consumption needs of Iowans.
- Iowa ranks 50th in fruit and vegetable consumption in the country. Iowans, even those who have plenty of calories to eat, may not have easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables that are in low demand.
- Communities in both rural and urban areas may lack sources of affordable, nutritious food. For instance, a gas station may be the only food market within a close distance to many people, and may not have many fresh, healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate options.

Policies and infrastructure

- Food assistance dollars often do not provide enough funding to afford fresh, nutritious food to feed a family for an entire month.

- Food pantries, meal programs, and other community resources for food access do not exist in many Iowa communities. Where these options are available, they cannot always meet the needs of the community. Many food pantries can provide only very limited fresh food options due either to available supply or limited capacity to store items that require refrigeration. Where these options are available, other challenges include only being open a few times per week or month, limits on how much food they can provide each family, and restrictions on how frequently people can come. School meal programs, a common source of food for children, are cut off during the summer in some Iowa communities.
- Low community participation in local/regional food and agricultural systems leaves a lot of untapped potential to develop community food security programs that could increase access to local foods.

Social inequities

- Iowans facing low employment prospects or only having access to low-wage and/or unreliable employment often struggle to make ends meet. Earning enough income to afford housing, other bills, and food is a challenge for many Iowans in rural and urban areas across the state.
- Having enough time to grow and/or prepare nutritious food can be a challenge with work, family, and other demands.
- Difficulty accessing sources of nutritious food also happens due to gaps in public and community infrastructure, including:
 - lack of personal/public transportation
 - insufficient pedestrian infrastructure
 - distance to markets or other food access sites
 - lack of accessible public garden space
 - lack of access to land for gardens (e.g., housing rentals may not have garden space or permit gardening)
- Racial, ethnic, gender, economic, and other social disparities in the food system generate uneven access to food and uneven participation in the food system.
- Food insecure community members typically have little say in planning and decision making in the food system; yet we could learn much from our fellow community members who know about these challenges firsthand!

Community spotlight - Rich Henderson, gardener, Dubuque County

"There is food insecurity in this neighborhood. And why is there food insecurity in this neighborhood? It's because mom and dad have, maybe, a job each and their car goes south on them. They need the car so they can go to work. What takes the hit? The grocery bill. So, there are a lot of different reasons why people have food insecurity, and I think that's the thing that we need to understand because a lot of Americans are not in the position where they have money in a savings account... If they take a hit on a major item, it's really a big problem. And then you have other people, well, they have two or three jobs but it's just barely making ends meet, because it doesn't give them health insurance and it doesn't pay them anything but, probably, minimum wage. And they have probably two or three different kids. It's really tough. It isn't that easy. There's a lot of parents who work really, really hard and they struggle."

Developing holistic community food security programs

ISU Extension and Outreach supports statewide and community programs to foster greater health and nutrition for all Iowans. We also strive to assist Iowans in developing practices that bring together food and community more holistically, attending to factors such as:

Food culture. What people like to grow, cook, and eat; family food traditions; community food events like potlucks; sharing recipes.

Food emotions. How food makes people feel, either growing it, sharing it, eating it. It's the myriad ways that food affects people emotionally and viscerally.

Food health. How food production and consumption nourishes mind, body, and planet. This includes how foods positively or negatively impact individual health, the health of others, and even the health of everything around us like the water, soils, butterflies, other animals, and the environment.



Food access and ownership. How people access healthy and culturally appropriate food. This can include buying, growing, and sharing food. It also includes how much time people have to devote to accessing/preparing food; access and ownership of required resources such as land, seeds, and supplies; transportation and other logistics issues. A lot of people take food access for granted, assuming that it's easy for everyone to shop at the grocery store or access a food pantry. But for many Iowans, access remains a big challenge.

Food decisions. How much say, or influence, all fellow community members have in the programs and policies that affect agriculture and food. Maybe you've decided to start a community garden or you sit on a board for a food pantry, or participate in other programs and policies. Vulnerable and marginalized people in our communities typically have little say over food systems governance and decisions.

Community food system. The big picture of one's community. It's the ways that a community comes together to promote all the above aspects of food for all members of the community.

Community spotlight:

Ilsa DeWald, North Liberty Food Pantry Volunteer and Garden Coordinator

"One thing we did, also, with an emphasis on creating more opportunities for families who are shopping to get involved in the pantry and at the garden was when we do, we do two surveys annually with families. For our spring survey, we had just this cardboard sheet list of activities that we did last year at the garden or we're planning to do again this year, potentially. Families were able to vote for activities that they wanted to see happen, just with post-it notes, like stick a post-it note up. It's pretty low bar even if they didn't, even if families didn't want to take the little survey we had, they could still participate in this way. That seemed to go over pretty well and helped start a lot of conversations about various activities and stuff that we had going on."

ISU Extension and Outreach Programs, Partnerships, and Resources

[Growing Together Iowa](#) is a partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, [Master Gardener](#) volunteers, and [ISU Research and Demonstration Farms](#). Together, we are working together on donation gardens throughout the state. The project is growing food for local pantries to help Iowans with low income to access fresh fruits and vegetables.

In 2016, the effort provided more than 64,000 pounds of produce (that's more than 192,000 servings of fruits and vegetables!) to local food pantries and food access sites. To learn more, search for [updates](#) from ISU Extension and Outreach Master Gardeners, look for new [articles](#) from the [Local Foods Program](#), and watch a [video](#) on Growing Together. To learn more about the project's approach to food insecurity, check out the following resources:

- [Food insecurity in Iowa](#) is the Master Gardener 2017 Winter Webcast Series. While this three-part webinar is specific to the Growing Together project, it contains general information about food insecurity in Iowa, including presentations on [hunger](#) and donation to [food banks and pantries](#).
- [Part III of the webcast](#) contains two presentations -- the first on 4-H partnership in community donation gardening projects, and a second on community food security in Iowa.
- Beginning in 2017, Growing Together Iowa has partnered with Extension in other states that are starting affiliate community donation gardening programs. University of Wisconsin Extension has created this [Tool Box](#) for Master Gardener volunteers.

The [Community Food Systems Program](#) is housed within the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach [Community and Economic Development](#) and [Local Foods](#) Programs. This program partners with communities across the state to develop and design their local and regional food

systems, and several communities have identified food security projects as part of their community food systems development.

[Double Up Food Bucks in Iowa](#) is an incentive program that provides matching funds for SNAP dollars spent at participating farmers markets and farm stands across the state. The program supports a \$1:\$1 match for up to \$10 per market day spent on Iowa-grown fruits and vegetables.



After a successful pilot year in 2016, the Iowa Healthiest State Initiative now accepts [applications](#) from farmers market and farm stand participants across the state.

[Food Corps Iowa](#) is partnered with the Local Foods Program. Its service members work with high-need schools on gardening, cooking, and tasting healthy food; improving school meals; and encouraging a school-wide culture of health. Food Corps Iowa teaches students about food security and equity, while also developing these practices hands-on at schools and through partnerships with organizations like [Matthew 25](#).

[Inequities in the Food System](#). The ISU Extension and Outreach Local Foods Program provides extensive up-to-date information and resources on efforts to address food system inequities.

Additional Resources by Topic

SNAP and locally grown produce. The ability of local foods purchases using SNAP dollars is easier than ever. The resources below provide information on SNAP participation for Farmers Markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture).

- [SNAP EBT at Farmers Markets](#). Does your local farmers market accept SNAP EBT? Check out the Iowa Department of Human Services website for up-to-date information. A list of participating farmers markets as of April 2016 can be found [here](#). Additionally, the Double Up Food Bucks program is being piloted at a limited number of farmers markets and farm stands in Iowa.
- [SNAP Guide for Farmers Markets](#). From the national Farmers Market Coalition. Brings together state and national resources on accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (formerly Food Stamps) at farmers markets.
- CSA SNAP Participation. Under the Agricultural Act of 2014, CSAs may apply as a SNAP eligible retailer (retailers must meet one of two [eligibility requirements](#); CSAs typically meet the second eligibility requirement, (B): More than one-half (50%) of the total dollar amount of all retail sales (food, nonfood, gas and services) sold in the store must be from the sale of eligible staple foods). Current regulations allow CSAs to accept SNAP payment no more than 14 days in advance. While this regulation may not meet



upfront operating capital needs for many CSA business models, those CSAs interested in acquiring SNAP retailer eligibility can [apply](#) through the USDA FNS. See this USDA FNS [publication](#) for more information, including contact information, or contact the Local Foods Program.

Social inequities and food insecurity

- [Building the Case for Racial Equity in the Food System](#). This report from the Center for Social Inclusion identifies and describes factors impacting food system equity such as social structure, access, agricultural and land ownership systems, labor and affordability. The report includes a series of questions to help identify entry points for addressing equity issues.
- [Center for Environmental Farming Systems Committee on Racial Equity in the Food System](#). CEFS is a partnership between North Carolina A&T University and North Carolina State University that addresses issues of food access, and includes the goal of racial equity in the food system. The committee webpage provides resources on racism and food inequity.

Further resources

- [Wholesome Wave](#). Reports and impact data from a series of national food access pilot projects including SNAP Double Value Coupons, Fruit and Vegetable “Prescription” programs, Healthy Food Commerce investments, and more.
- [Healthy Corner Stores Network](#). Resources for improving healthy food access to underserved communities through corner stores and convenience stores.
- [End Hunger in the Heartland](#). Book and documentary on community strategies for alleviating hunger and improving food access in Iowa.
- [Lettuce Learn](#). Academic journal article about community donation gardening and food insecurity written by graduate students from ISU Sustainable Agriculture Student Association. The student association has been collaborating with [Food at First](#) in Ames, Iowa, since 2012, and began donation gardening in 2013.

References

Bradley, Katharine and Hank Herrera. ["Decolonizing Food Justice: Naming, Resisting, and Researching Colonizing Forces in the Movement."](#) Antipode. 48(1), pp. 97-114.

USDA ERS. ["Food Security in the United States: How Do States Compare?"](#)

USDA ERS. [Definition of Food Security](#).

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