

CATEGORY: POPULATIONS/PROGRAMS

Food Insecure Populations & Programs

Food insecurity affects many individuals and populations worldwide. It is defined as people who “don’t have enough food to eat or don’t know where their next meal will come from, who have limited or uncertain access to safe and nutritious food” (USDA, 2024). In North America, statistics confirm that people living in rural communities, particularly in the Southern USA are more likely to lack access to food, particularly nutritious food (Food Research & Action Center, 2018; Coleman-Jensen, 2022). Marginalized communities - people with disabilities, LGTBQ, and people of color are at greater risk of food insecurity due to systemic problems and poverty. Research has investigated food insecurity among domestic abuse survivors and their families, incarcerated individuals, Latinx immigrant families, and indigenous people (Branco, 2018; Cochrane, 2019; Devine-Wright et al., 2019). The health impacts are far-reaching for children and adults, with correlations to mental disorders, obesity, and chronic disease (Burke, 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017).

Horticulture for health initiatives and people-plant programming are making efforts to address food insecurity through programming, community gardens and other initiatives. Identifying and then programming for people experiencing food insecurity can be challenging. The types of programming that exist to combat food insecurity, working with individuals who self-identify or participate in these initiatives continues to grow. Examples include organizations distributing free seeds, teaching people to grow healthy food, hospitals identifying and providing food to patients from their associated gardens, and master gardeners supporting community gardening, with these locally-driven efforts occurring in many communities.

Community gardens have emerged as important places for improving food access and food sovereignty that have less stigma about poverty or lack of food resources. College campuses have also seen action related to growing, providing and supporting efforts to improve food access in recognition that greater number of students in these settings are food insecure (Bruening et al., 2017; Classens et al., 2023; Levkoe et al., 2019). A focus on nutritious food, food assistance and reductions in food waste are part of this conversation as is the impact of the war in Ukraine exacerbating global food insecurity (Diekmann et al., 2020; Timler et al., 2019; Bacon et al., 2024, International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2022).

For related resources refer to category: Food, Nutrition and Food Action – all sections; category: Landscapes for Health – Community Gardens, Urban Farms.

Key Organizations

[Food Research & Action Center](#)

[Harvest Now](http://harvest-now.net/mission) <http://harvest-now.net/mission>

[Inter-Institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability](#)

[Planting Justice](#)

Books, journals & epublications on corrections populations and programs

Alkon, A.H, & Guthman, J. (Eds.), *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action*. University of California Press

[Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development \(JAFSCD\)](#)

[Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition](#)

Research & articles

Recently published selected research & articles:

- Adams, E.L., Caccavale, L.J., Smith, D., & Bean, M.K. (2020). Food insecurity, the home food environment, and parent feeding practices in the era of COVID-19. *Obesity*, 28(11), 2056–2063
- Alkon, A.H., & Guthman, J. (2017). Introduction. In A.H. Alkon, & J. Guthman (Eds.), *The new food activism: Opposition, cooperation, and collective action*. University of California Press, 1-27.
- Bacon, CM., Gleicher, A., McCurry, E. et al. (2024, April). Toward a justice approach to emergency food assistance and food waste: Exploring pantry-urban gardener partnerships in California’s Santa Clara County. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*.
- Barlett, P.F. (2017). Campus alternative food projects and food service realities: Alternative strategies. *Human Organization*, 76(3), 189–203
- Bellemare, M.F., & Dusoruth, V. (2020). Who participates in urban agriculture? An empirical analysis. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 43(1), 430–442.
- Branco, P. (2018). [How therapeutic horticulture help meet the complex needs of domestic violence survivors and their children?](#) [food security a factor]. VAWnet.
- Bruckner, H.K., Westbrook, M., Loberg, L. et al. (2021). “Free” food with a side of shame? Combating stigma in emergency food assistance programs in the quest for food justice. *Geoforum*, 123, 99–106.
- Bruening, M., Agro, K., Payne-Sturges, D., & Laska, M.N. (2017). The struggle is real: A systematic review of food insecurity on postsecondary education campuses. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 117(11), 1767–1791.
- Burke, M.P., Martini, L.H., Çayır, E. et al. (2016). Severity of household food insecurity is positively associated with mental disorders among children and adolescents in the United States. *Journal of Nutrition*, 146(10), 2019–2026.
- Calloway, E., Carpenter, L.R., Gargano, T. et al. (2023) New measures to assess the “other” three pillars of food security—Availability, utilization, and stability. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 20(1), Article 51.
- Cameron, G., Roach, J., Dukeshire, S., & Keys, D. (2023). Raising awareness and advocating change: The work of Nova Scotia food security NGOs. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(4), 103–122.
- Classens, M., Adam, K., & Srebot, S. (2023). Food systems change and the alternative campus foodscape. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(3), 155–176.
- Classens, M., & Sytsma, E. (2020). Student food literacy, critical food systems pedagogy, and the responsibility of postsecondary institutions. *Canadian Food Studies La Revue Canadienne Des études Sur l’alimentation*, 7(1), 8–19.
- Cochrane, R. (2019). Passionate partners transform incarcerated women into urban farmers. *AHTA Magazine*, 47(3), 11.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M.P., Gregory, C.A., & Singh, A. (2022). [Household food security in the United States in 2021](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., & Nord, M. (2013). Food insecurity among households with working-age adults with disabilities. *USDA-ERS Economic Research Report*, (144).
- Devine-Wright, H., Baybutt, M., & Meek, R. (2019). Producing food in English and Welsh prisons. *Appetite*, 143, 104433.
- Diekmann, L.O., Gray, L.C., & Baker, G.A. (2020). Growing ‘good food’: Urban gardens, culturally acceptable produce and food security. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, 35(2), 169–181.
- Feeding America. (2023). [Connecting health and food access](#).

- Fleming, L. (2024). University students' health & well-being supported by nature engagement & campus gardens. *Digging In*, 10(2), 6-7.
- Food Research & Action Center. (2020). [Food over fear: Overcoming barriers to connect Latinx immigrant families to federal nutrition and food programs.](#)
- Food Research & Action Center. (2018). [How hungry is America? Food hardship in America: A look at national, regional, state, and metropolitan statistical area data on household struggles with hunger.](#)
- Galhena, DH., Freed, R., & Maredia, KM. (2013). Home gardens: A promising approach to enhance household food security and wellbeing. *Agriculture & Food Security*, 8.
- Gregory, C A., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2017). [Food insecurity, chronic disease, and health among working-age adults.](#)
- Hernandez, D.C., Reesor, L.M., & Murillo, R. (2017). Food insecurity and adult overweight/obesity: Gender and race/ethnic disparities. *Appetite*, 117, 373–378.
- Houghtaling, B., Haynes-Maslow, L., Andress, L. et al. (2023). Food insecurity among households with children during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 12(3), 225–237.
- Huang, J., & Barnidge, E. (2016). Low-income children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. *Social Science & Medicine*, 150, 8–14.
- International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems. (2022). [Another perfect storm? How the failure to reform food systems has allowed the war in Ukraine to spark a third global food price crisis in 15 years, and what can be done to prevent the next one.](#)
- Jones, A.D., Ngure, F.M., Pelto, G., & Young, S.L. (2013). What are we assessing when we measure food security? A compendium and review of current metrics. *Advances in Nutrition*, 4(5), 481–505.
- Levkoe, C.Z., Erlich, S., & Archibald, S. (2019). [Campus food movements and community service-learning: Mobilizing partnerships through the Good Food Challenge in Canada.](#) *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning*, 5(1), Article 1.
- Metallinos-Katsaras, E., Must, A., & Gorman, K. (2012). A longitudinal study of food insecurity on obesity in preschool children. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 112(12), 1949–1958.
- Moore, C. (n.d.). [Emory Urban Health initiative food insecurity programs/projects.](#)
- Nazim, A., Martinez, S., Byrd, A. et al. (2019). A systematic review of food insecurity among US students in higher education. *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition*, 14(5), 725–740.
- Spark, A., Dinour, L.M., & Obenchain, J. (2015). Prison farms and food banks. In *Nutrition in public health: Principles, policies, and practice* (2nd edition). CRC Press.
- Sweet, C., Ward, J., Hinds, B. et al. (n.d.). [Addressing food insecurity: Expanding access through community gardens.](#) University of Tennessee Extension.
- Timler, K., Varcoe, C., & Brown, H. (2019). Growing beyond nutrition: How a prison garden program highlights the potential of shifting from food security to food sovereignty for indigenous peoples. *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 14(2), 95-114.
- Tims, K., Haggerty, M., Jemison, J. et al. (2021). Gardening for change: Community giving gardens and senior food insecurity. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 10(4).
- U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. (2024). [Food insecurity.](#) Healthy People 2030
- Watkins, C. (2017). Industrialized bodies: Women, food, and environmental justice in the criminal justice system. In Nocella, Ducre & Lupinacci (Eds.), *Addressing environmental and food justice toward dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Examples of food insecure populations and programs

Campus Nature Rx movement supports post-secondary students in nature engagement, campus gardens, food security and environmental activism.

<https://www.flhhn.com/cultivate-epub.html>

City of Westminster partnered with Can. Province's Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, GROWcery Food Network Society and Canadian Horticultural Therapy Association to create a Community Therapeutic Garden including employment opportunities.

<https://www.newwestcity.ca/2020/10/14/media-release-city-of-new-westminster-announces-community-therapeutic-garden-in-partnership-with-the-province-growcery-food-network-and-the-canadian-horticultural-therapy-association-to-help-address-food-insecurity-in-the-community.php>

Community Seed Distribution program through Denver Urban Gardens (DUG) is one effort to support food access, food security and local food sovereignty, with distribution annually of 100,000 seed packets at no cost. Related, DUG's *Culturally Inclusive Seeds* program provides rare and specialty plant variety seeds for marginalized communities in support of shared diversity.

<https://dug.org/food-access-programs-overview/>

Farm and Rehabilitation Meals (FARM) program in San Diego grows and serves farm produce in prison.

<https://foodtank.com/news/2018/08/20-organizations-planting-the-seeds-for-food-justice-in-prisons/#:~:text=San%20Diego's%20Richard%20J.,to%20grow%20and%20harvest%20produce.>

Food Security Program at Northern Light Acadia Hospital, Maine uses early intervention methods and local partners to address food insecurity by screening/identifying food insecure patients, supplementing patient food bags with produce from Acadia Therapeutic Garden, and identifying additional food insecurity resources.

<https://northernlighthealth.org/Our-System/Acadia-Hospital/Patients-Visitors/Acadia-Food-Insecurity-Program>

Fruit Tree Planting Foundation international non-profit is dedicated to planting fruit trees to alleviate world hunger, strengthen communities and improve the environment.

<https://www.ftpf.org/apply>

Garden Grants for schools, nonprofits and communities address food insecurity including Growing Spaces in-kind grants; links to garden grants are included.

<https://growingspaces.com/gardening-grants/>

Lettuce Live Garden Projects involves multi-faceted approaches of building community gardens at work sites, community locations, schools, and backyards, based in Missouri, TX.

<https://www.lettucelive.org/garden-projects>

Lookout Garden at Mission Institution partners with Correctional Service Canada (in British Columbia) addressing food security, food access for inmates and local communities, in particular, Aboriginal communities.

https://lookoutsociety.ca/lookout_projects/mission-community-garden/

Master Gardeners in North Carolina participate in food action in response to food insecurity by cultivating community gardens, fostering therapeutic partnerships and teaching new gardeners how to grow food.

<https://emgv.ces.ncsu.edu/2021/03/master-gardener-volunteers-in-action-meeting-community-needs/>

NW Youth Power Child Enrichment Center (daycare), Atlanta GA established a garden in partnership with Grady Health System Asa Yancey Neighborhood Health Center providing food for kids, families and patients.

<https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/UHIFoodInsecurityProgramsandProjects.pdf>

Sprouting Readers program at PAWKids after-school daycare center uses a school garden, literacy + gardening skills, and stem education to enhance learning and food literacy.

<https://www.senate.ga.gov/committees/Documents/UHIFoodInsecurityProgramsandProjects.pdf>

Sustainable CT (Connecticut) is promoting community growing spaces across the state as a strategy for wellness and food security using funding, regional collaborations, provision of tool kits, and success stories of funded projects like sidewalk snack beds, TH and green houses.

https://sustainablect.org/fileadmin/Random_PDF_Files/Archived_Actions/2024_Actions/10.4_Develop_and_Promote_Community_Growing_Spaces.pdf

Videos, websites and webinars on food insecure populations and programs

American Community Garden Association website shares resources and spotlights gardens of the month as success stories and inspiration. Eden Garden, Joliet Ill. is one such example where church, children and food literacy/food access have thrived together.

<https://www.communitygarden.org/post/copy-of-community-garden-spotlight-of-the-month-wagner-farms-arboretum-gardens-nj>

Benton-Franklin Juvenile Detention Center Garden has inmates grow food for educational purposes and for addressing food insecurity, working with master gardeners (2016).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vawSAls1gdo>

Florida Prison Farmworker Programs help state and inmates. “According to UF/IFAS, at the West Florida Research and Education Center in Jay, FL, prisoners produced nearly \$1 million of fresh produce that fed hundreds of needy families and saved the state money.” (2015).

<https://www.growingproduce.com/vegetables/florida-prison-farmworker-programs-fruitful-for-state-inmates/>

Garden for Good, Hutchinson Correctional Facility in Kansas, (video) provides individual garden beds for inmates to grow their own food; they donate food to local groups; sell produce to inmates and other innovative activities, supported by Kansas State Research and Extension (2014).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VKDROXMYmQ

Growing Spaces.com website shares resources, tips on sustainable food production, and funding sources. Article “Floating Gardens: The Sustainable Food Production Secret of the Ancients” is one example.

<https://growingspaces.com/floating-gardens/>

Food Action is Happening in People-Plant Programming webinar/YouTube video by Lesley Fleming, HTR and Donna Perez Lugones identify projects and organizations addressing food access and food security (2023).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORSrtP1qBhU&t=4s>

Need to Know Developments in Horticultural Therapy and Horticulture for Health includes nutrition and food literacy with projects addressing food/nutrition access. Youtube video/webinar (2023).

[New Developments in Horticultural Therapy and Horticulture for Health - YouTube](#)

Nutrition Garden Rx webinar/youtube video shares how garden-based initiatives can address food insecurity.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBNp3Lr1e0M>

Salvation Farms organization, with the Vermont Dept of Corrections uses locally grown potatoes and apples in prison cafeterias, in addition to hands-on food processing skills training, planting and donating food to local food banks.

<https://www.salvationfarms.org/our-work/#partners>

THAD database includes therapeutic horticulture activities specifically for food insecure populations (activities like kitchen waste: regrow avocado seeds, freezing herbs, planting & building a pallet garden, field trip to community garden, growing garlic, herb propagation by cutting & seeds).

<https://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/therapeutic-horticulture-activities-database/food-insecure/>

20 organizations Planting the Seeds for Food Justice in Prisons article on Foodtank website identifies newer trends.

<https://foodtank.com/news/2018/08/20-organizations-planting-the-seeds-for-food-justice-in-prisons/>

Related organizations

[Food Matters](#) (U.K.)

Local Cooperative Extension & master gardener programs

Written & compiled by Lesley Fleming in 2024