

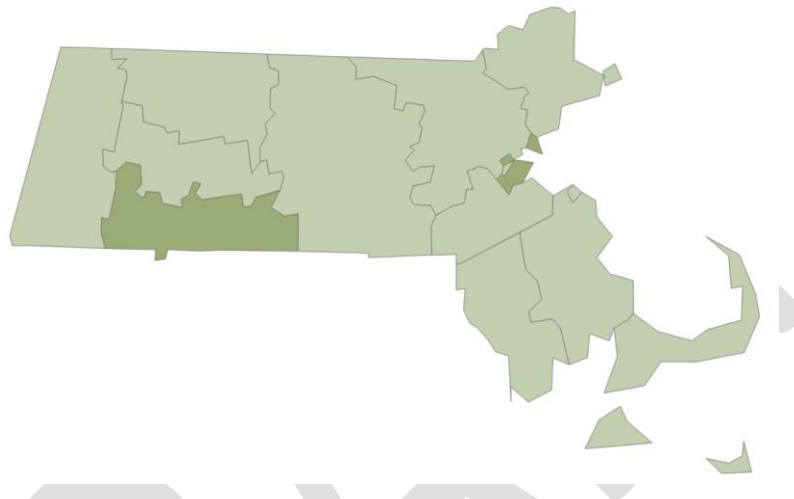
# Food Security White Paper

## Key Facts

- **Hamden County has the highest food insecurity for children in the Commonwealth:** Hampden County's child food insecurity rate is the highest in Massachusetts at 27% (Figure 1). Its overall food insecurity rate is 17.4%, a close second behind Suffolk County (17.6%).<sup>i</sup>

Figure 1. Food Insecurity Rate by County

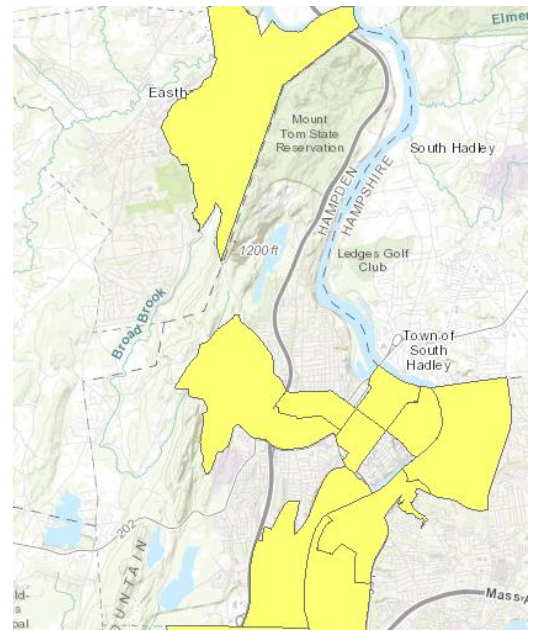
2020 Projected Overall Food Insecurity Rate



Source: [Feeding America](#)

- **The COVID-19 has reversed years of progress in food security:** Pre-pandemic data reflect the lowest food insecurity rates in more than 20 years, but the current crisis has reversed improvements made over the past decade since the Great Recession.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Most of downtown Holyoke is a food desert:** The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission found in a case study of Holyoke that, while the smaller markets in downtown Holyoke are an essential source of food for downtown residents, supermarkets with lower cost foods and fresh produce are difficult to access for lower-income households without access to cars.<sup>iii</sup> This results in most of downtown Holyoke and other adjacent neighborhoods being classified as “Food Deserts”, areas with poor access to affordable healthy foods (Figure 2)
- **Latinos are almost twice as likely to live in food insecure households as non-Hispanic white Americans:** Compared to other groups, a higher proportion of Latino workers are employed in the leisure and hospitality industry and a lower proportion are employed in roles that can be performed at home. As a result, unemployment spiked during the pandemic and food insecurity in Latino households is estimated at 15.8%.

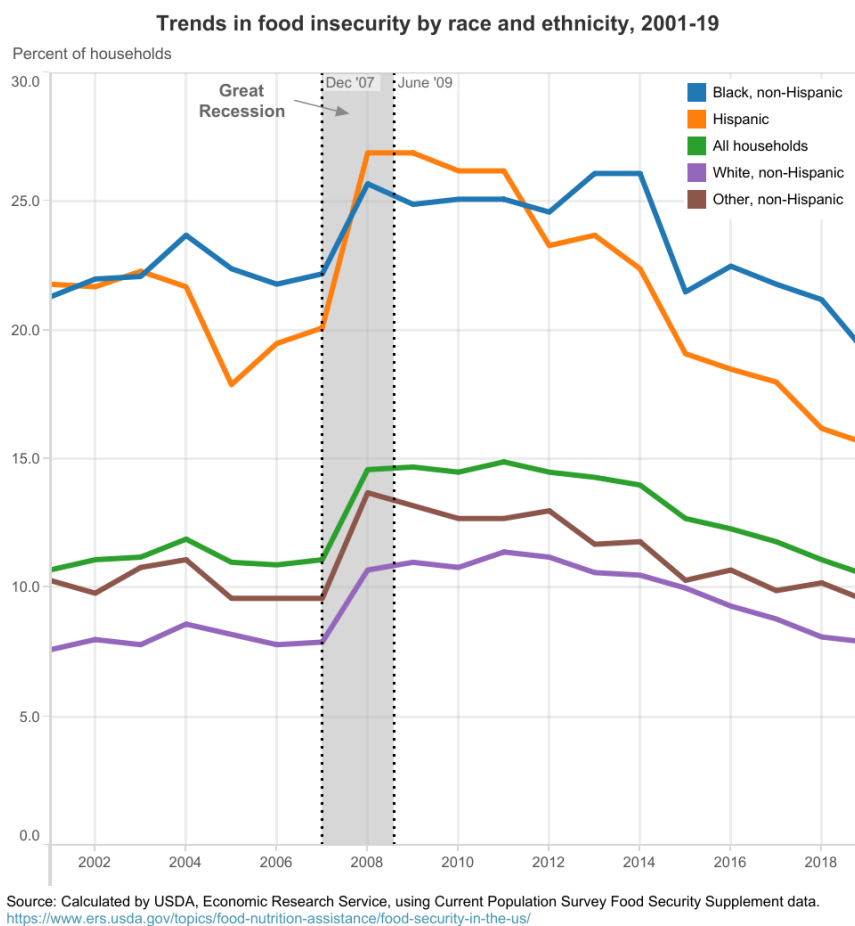
Figure 2. Food Deserts in Holyoke



Source: [US Department of Agriculture](#)

This is nearly twice as high as in non-Hispanic white households at 8.1% (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity



Source: [US Department of Agriculture](#)

- **At-home food production expands access to healthy food and saves money:** A study in San Jose, California showed that home gardeners saved on average \$92 per month and had access to a wider variety of healthy foods.<sup>iv</sup>

## Context and History

Food security means that people have access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members. At a minimum, this includes: 1) readily available, nutritionally adequate, and safe foods and 2) assured ability to acquire personally acceptable foods in a socially acceptable way. While Massachusetts has one of the most resilient food systems of any state in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic has set back decades of progress that the commonwealth – and Hampden County – had been making to reduce food insecurity.

Unfortunately, the pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing inequities in food access; in 2019, African-American and Hispanic households had food insecurity rates 11 and 8 percentage points higher, respectively, than white non-Hispanic households. Due to its relatively high poverty rates, a history of residential segregation, and long-standing disparities in economic opportunities for black and brown households, Hampden County has the worst food security for children in the Commonwealth and second-worst for overall food security, just ahead of Suffolk County.

The responsibility to ensure adequate access to healthy food is shared across federal, state, local, and nonprofit programs. The US Department of Agriculture has a focus on ensuring that Americans have access to affordable food and runs multiple programs to support that mission, including the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). The Commonwealth provides nutritional assistance through the Department of Agricultural Resources and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education through its free lunch program. And the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts is the primary nonprofit organization providing food assistance in the region.

COVID-19 highlighted another weakness in the food security system – the tremendous dependence we have on the public school system to act as a social safety net and food distribution mechanism. As reported in the Harvard Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation, free meal sites during summer months only reach one in seven children typically reached in-school.<sup>v</sup>

This food insecurity in Hampden County stands in stark contrast to a thriving local food production and distribution system in the Pioneer Valley. There are dozens of successful small- and medium-sized farms run by farmers who cultivate some of the most fertile agricultural soils in the world. Local grocery stores and co-ops stock local products, and residents can take advantage of a number of local farmers markets (including one in downtown Holyoke) – many of which accept Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. A key challenge is opening up access to this abundance to all Holyoke residents

## What Can We Do?

While much food policy is made at the state and federal levels, there are several opportunities for the City of Holyoke to reduce food insecurity among its most overburdened and underserved neighborhoods.

- **Zoning and Land Use** – As explained by the American Planning Institute, developing zoning or policy guidance regarding community gardens and urban agriculture can promote food production on vacant lots. They note, “Open-space goals and policies can encourage the conversion of vacant or abandoned land to urban agriculture and the preservation of existing urban agriculture. Economic development goals and policies can lead to new financing tools for urban agriculture development; tax incentives can encourage the location of urban agriculture in underserved neighborhoods on vacant property.”<sup>vi</sup>
- **State Grants** – The City and its nonprofit organizational partners can continue leveraging state funding opportunities to combat food insecurity. One example is the [Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program](#), which in October 2020 awarded \$500,000 to the Boys & Girls Club to renovate its building with new kitchen equipment for a centralized food hub.
- **Federal Grants** – While existing federal programs such as SNAP and free meal programs through the public schools are critical to reducing food insecurity, they are insufficient in the face of the tremendous need exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Grants such as the [Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program](#) and the [Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program](#) are opportunities for the City to expand access to healthy foods.
- **Local Partnerships** – The City can continue building local partnerships with local organizations such as Nuestra Raices, Kate’s Kitchen, and other key stakeholders involved in the local food system. One compelling model is presented by [LiveWell Springfield](#), a coalition of local and regional organizations dedicated to improving access to healthy food and encouraging more active living in Springfield. Supported by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and the Public Health Association of Western Massachusetts, there are regular meetings of key staff members from the City of Springfield, PVTA, PVPC, and numerous grassroots organizations (e.g. Gardening the Community). In 2012, they were successful in receiving a \$2 million Community Transformation Grant to promote healthier living. This is a model that the City of Holyoke could look to and emulate.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-food-insecurity/>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Brief\\_Local%20Impact\\_10.2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Brief_Local%20Impact_10.2020_0.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.pvpc.org/content/pioneer-valley-food-security-plan>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/urban-gardens-improve-food-security>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.chlpi.org/how-covid-19-threatens-the-safety-net-for-us-children/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/urbanagriculture/>

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