



What's At Stake?

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”¹ All Vermonters have a right to healthy, affordable food, not only today but in times of crisis, regardless of their life circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the benefit of a thriving agricultural economy in buffering national food supply chain disruptions, particularly for those already struggling to obtain adequate food. In order to reduce climate and pandemic-related risks to our food security, and to protect the most vulnerable, we need to reorient a significant part of our food production to the regional level. Coordinated, statewide action is needed to ensure food security across Vermont, in times of crisis and times of calm, for every Vermonter.

Current Conditions

Household food insecurity is a result of structural socioeconomic factors often beyond the control of individual households, and eliminating it will require a system-level approach to ending poverty and other barriers to healthy food in Vermont. Food insecurity encompasses not only lack of food but the nutritional quality and accessibility of available food. It is one of several important social determinants of physical and mental health, along with housing instability, household energy insecurity, transportation difficulties, and problems accessing affordable healthcare.² Vermont’s agricultural economy positions us well to take advantage of local and regional food production as a means of mitigating food insecurity in the present and to feed us during future social disruptions related to climate change, disease outbreaks, and other disasters. However, even where a reliable local and regional food supply exists, it is often unaffordable for many Vermonters, even those who are not counted by the USDA as being food insecure.

During the pandemic, rising need for food assistance, anticipated long-term disruption to food supply chains, and the impact on agricultural and food-related business viability, all illustrated where short and longer-term planning could increase food system resilience. The public food assistance system, which includes programs such as 3SquaresVT, WIC, school meals, and meal programs for older adults, is effective but not adequate to eliminate food insecurity. Tools do exist to help planners and towns with food supply and access planning, but these are newly available, and more training, dissemination, and promotion of food security planning tools are needed. Vermont should ensure that municipal, state and regional plans address the risk of food supply chain disruptions and prepare for emergencies which may arise.

Percent of Vermont Population Experiencing Food Insecurity

Food security rates can change rapidly. A UVM study reported a 33% increase in food insecurity in the COVID-19 pandemic, after years of the rate holding steady. The resulting rate of approximately 1-in-4 Vermonters facing food insecurity was higher than any time during the Great Recession.

In the 12 Months Prior to March 2020

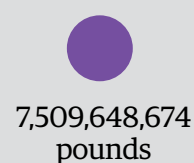


In March 2020



New England Food Production and Imports

Estimate of New England Food Production, 2018



Estimate of Food Flow Into New England, 2018



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Political and corporate narratives which ascribe food insecurity to individual responsibility rather than socioeconomic factors have been misleading, and this can lead to limited solutions.
- Wages, the cost of living, skills in and time for preparing foods, an aging population, and racial, ethnic, and gender inequities are among the socioeconomic structural factors limiting increased food security in Vermont.
- Due in part to federal agricultural policies and subsidies, low-cost, unhealthy, processed foodstuffs are widely available, while nutritious, whole foods are higher-cost and harder to access. This imbalance impacts both consumers and farmers.
- There is no coordinated or comprehensive effort underway to plan for the impacts of climate and pandemic-induced emergencies on Vermont's food supply and shared food security.
- State-wide efforts to increase Vermont farm business viability are not necessarily able to also consider ensuring a diversity of food production for Vermont's dietary needs (see [Food Access and Farm Viability brief](#)).

Opportunities

- The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the national and local food supply chain's strengths and weaknesses, including the important role of Vermont's farms. This new understanding, and creative community responses, can guide future plans, policies, and emergency preparedness.
- State, regional, and municipal planning, including emergency and hazard mitigation planning, are potential ways to ensure food access and security.
- Efforts are underway in Vermont and New England to increase regional agricultural self-reliance and disaster resiliency, and need additional funding support.³
- Federal supplemental nutrition programs such as school meals, 3SquaresVT, and WIC, and the (relatively much smaller) charitable food system, are proven assistance to households where money is a major barrier to healthy food, and utilization can be increased through outreach, funding, and normalizing participation.
- Models from other states where all food assistance programs are housed under a single agency could provide administrative efficiency and more effectively tie food access to local food production.

Recommendations

- Fund a research project to fully understand household food insecurity in Vermont and how to invest in its elimination. The design and implementation of the research project should engage academics, advocacy groups, and impacted individuals, and include research on geographic spread, root causes, and costs to the health care, educational, and emergency response systems.⁴ Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont Foodbank, and others have begun planning such a study. Estimated cost: \$150,000.⁵
- Make a Vermont food security plan, centered around a thriving food system and inspired by community-based responses to food insecurity and disruptive events. Involve food insecure individuals as well as farmers in the planning, and investigate questions including, but not limited to, affordable housing, health care, transportation, siting of retail grocery stores, food distribution, and ensuring the continued production of food in Vermont. Develop an action plan to coordinate investment and implementation, alongside the Vermont Agriculture and Food Strategic Plan.
- Integrate food security into existing planning systems, with transparency and public involvement. Work to adopt state and regional -level policies, procedures, and plans to ensure that the Vermont food supply is sufficient to withstand global or national food supply chain disruptions caused by climate change and other disasters.
- Invest in existing solutions for food insecurity which have proven to be effective in assisting vulnerable Vermonters. Provide universal breakfast and lunch programs for every Vermont student, and establish local food-chain relationships within each school cafeteria. Increase investment and utilization of public food assistance programs, including efforts to connect these programs with local farmers, and support the charitable food system in its efforts to partner with farms through direct purchasing. (See [Food Access and Farm Viability brief](#) and [School Food Procurement brief](#).)

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFAM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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