

Skagit County Food Security Data Report



Vision: Skagit County has a resilient local food system that provides equitable access to nutritious, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food for all.



POPULATION
HEALTH TRUST
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

August 2023

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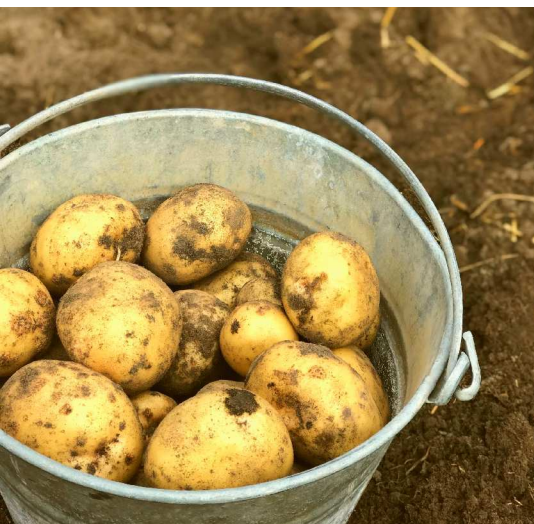
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Acknowledgements

Many partners provided data or direction to make this report possible. Gratitude to:

- Skagit County Population Health Trust (PHT)
- Skagit County Food Security Steering Committee and Workgroup
- Community Action Agency of Skagit County
- Skagit County Food Banks
- Skagit County Senior Services
- DSHS Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- WA DOH Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)



Introduction

In 2020-2021, Skagit County Public Health completed a Community Health Assessment (CHA) in collaboration with the Skagit County Population Health Trust (PHT). One of the significant challenges identified during this process was equitable access to food. To begin to address this issue, the COVID Recovery Plan (2022) identified goals and strategies for addressing food security, including the formation of a Food Security Workgroup and identification of preliminary data sources to better tell the story of hunger in Skagit County.

Food security is defined as: access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.[2] According to 2019 estimates by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), approximately 11% of Skagit County residents, or 14,000 people, experience some level of food insecurity. The rate is even higher for children less than 18 years (16.2%).[2] Food security is influenced by a variety of factors, some of which include: income, employment, race/ethnicity/culture, and disability. Food security can be long term or temporary. As a recent example, the COVID-19 pandemic affected food security levels of many, and added additional pressures to an already stressed food system.

11%
of Skagit residents, including
16%
of children <18 years
are experiencing food
insecurity

About Skagit County

Skagit County covers 1,730 square miles in northwest Washington. Skagit has a rich agricultural history and produces a variety of crops, including: blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, tulips, daffodils, pickling cucumbers, potatoes, apples, and vegetable seed.[3] The population of Skagit County has steadily increased since 1980 (Figure 1) and as of 2022, is comprised of 131,179 residents.

The median age of Skagit County is 41.6 years. Twenty-two percent of the population are considered 'workforce age' (i.e., ages 18-64 years), and 21% are greater than 65 years of age. The Washington Office of Financial Management (OFM) predictions indicate that over a third of the population will be above age 60 in the next decade (Figure 2).[6]

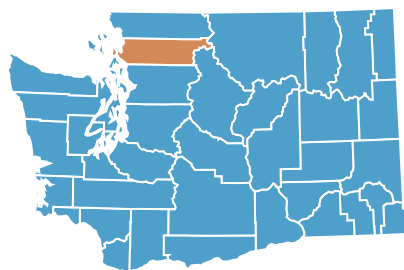


Figure 1. The population of Skagit County has steadily increased since 1980

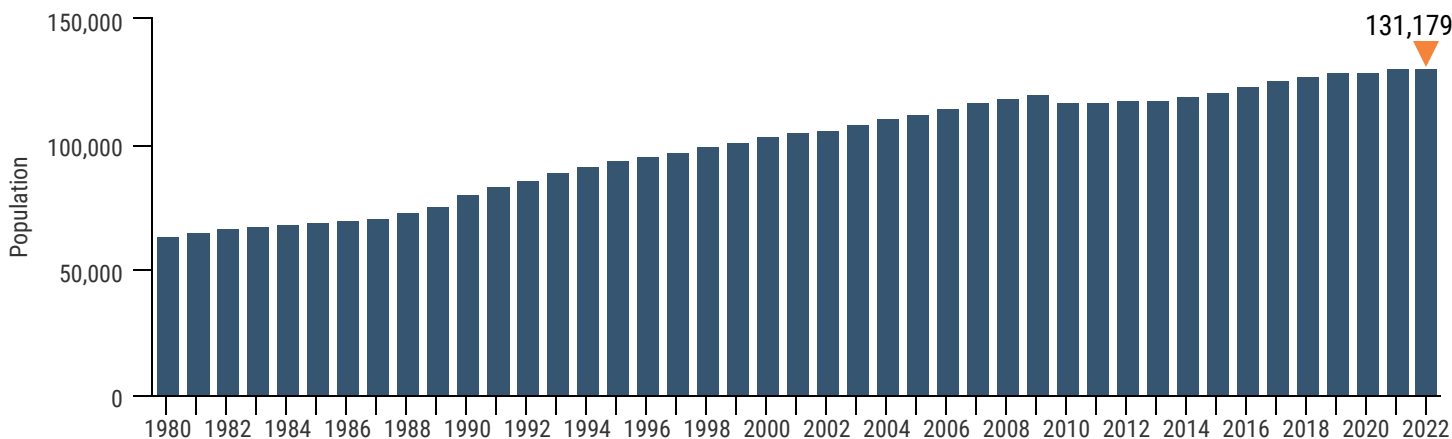
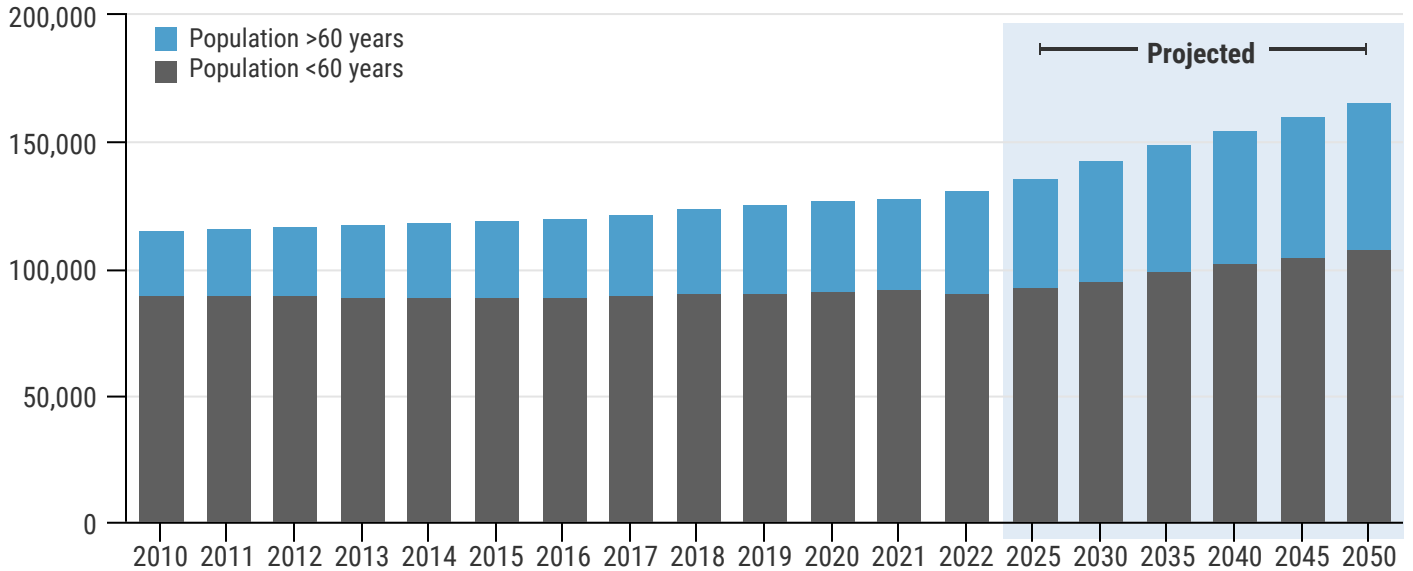


Figure 2. One third of Skagit County residents are expected to be older than 60 years within the next 7-10 years



Three quarters of Skagit County’s population identify as White (non-Hispanic). Nineteen percent are Hispanic or Latino, and smaller percentages are Asian/Pacific Islander (3%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (2%), and Black or African American (1%)[2]. However, when observed through the lens of food security, the demographic distribution is markedly different, and disparities become evident (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Race and ethnicity of Skagit County residents

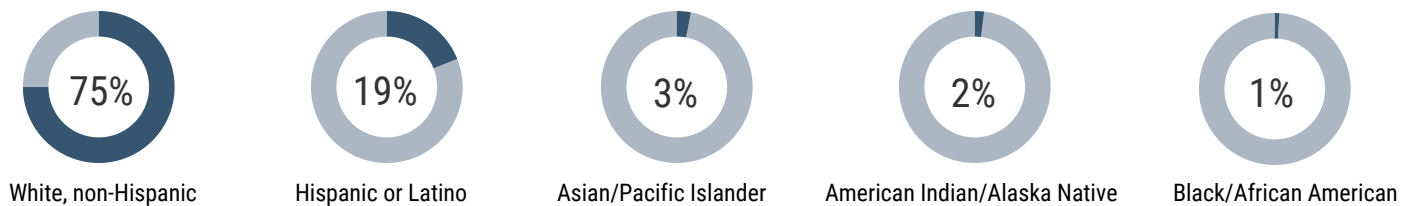
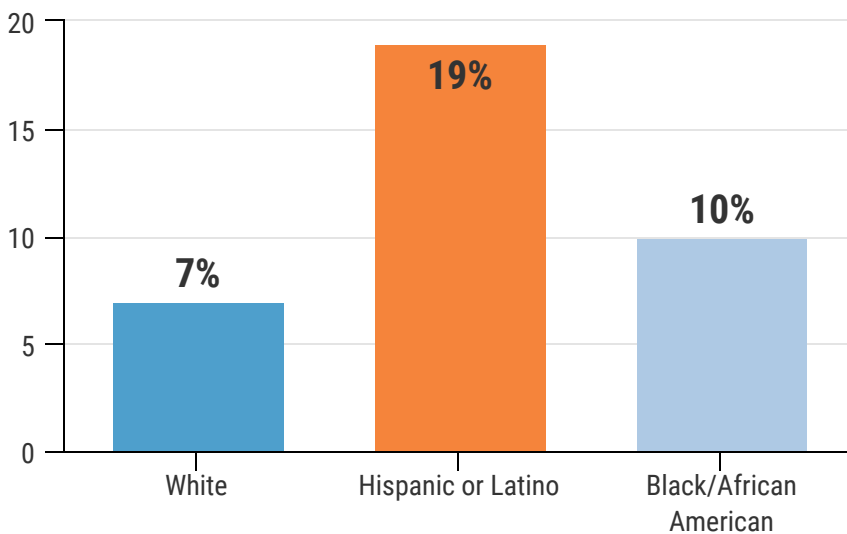


Figure 3. Food Security by Race -- Skagit County, 2021



In 2021, Skagit County residents who identified as **Hispanic or Latino** were more likely to report being food insecure compared to those who identified as **White** or **African American**.

Factors That Contribute to Food Security

Employment

The unemployment rate in Skagit County is back to pre-pandemic levels after a high of 9.7% in 2020, but at 5.3% remains higher than that of the state of Washington and the U.S. (4.2 and 3.6%, respectively).[7] Employment rates vary over the course of a year due to changes in the number of farmworkers working seasonal positions. In 2023, the average hourly wage is \$22.91 and minimum wage is \$15.74 per hour.

Cost of living

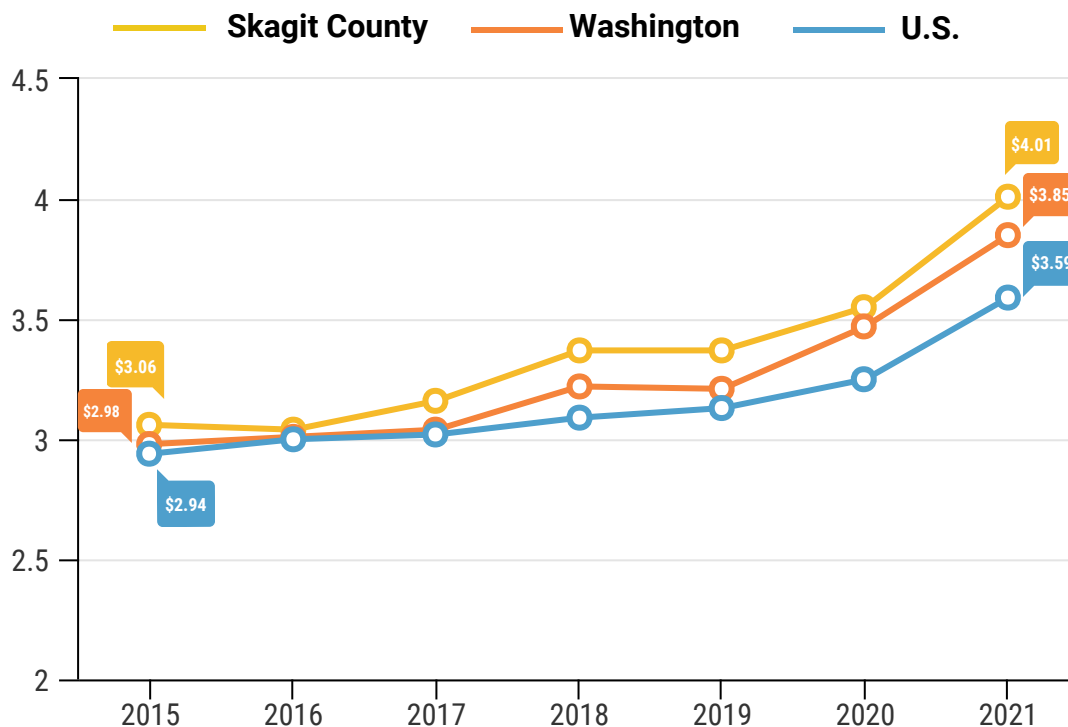
Several factors contribute to the overall cost of living in Skagit County. These include housing and utilities, geography, food, childcare, medical care, and transportation. Skagit County is ranked 10th in the state of Washington for median house price and had a rental vacancy rate of 1% in 2021.[6,7]

The rental vacancy rate in Skagit County was 1% in 2021.

Nearly 7% of Skagit residents do not have healthcare coverage.[2] While the cost of food has increased almost universally, Skagit County meal costs have consistently been higher than state and federal averages over the past five years (Figure 4). In addition, costs of living trend higher in urban areas of the county compared to those that are classified as rural.

Figure 4. It costs more to feed a family in Skagit County

The average cost of a meal for a Skagit County resident has increased over time and is higher than costs for residents of Washington and the U.S.

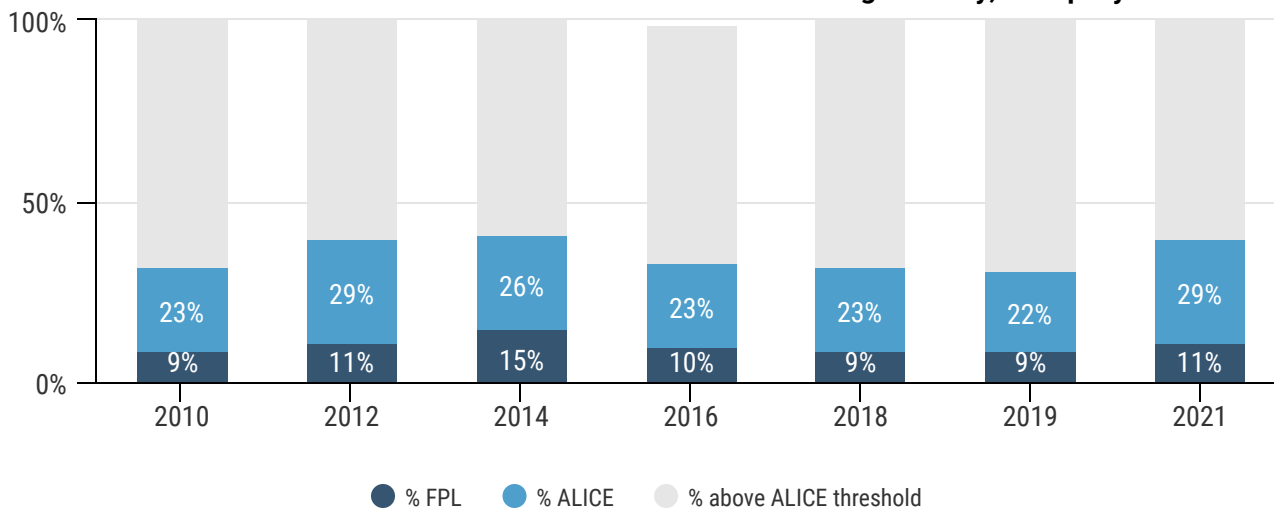


See data notes on pg.15 for how this metric was calculated.



The ALICE Essentials Index (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) is used in this report to present a more equitable view of income levels needed to make ends meet. ALICE also includes households that are just above the federal poverty level (FPL) but when other costs of living are factored in, continue to struggle month to month (Figure 5). Utilizing ALICE standards allows for a more accurate view of the inequities of food security in Skagit County and suggest a potentially higher burden of food insecurity than the USDA rates described earlier.

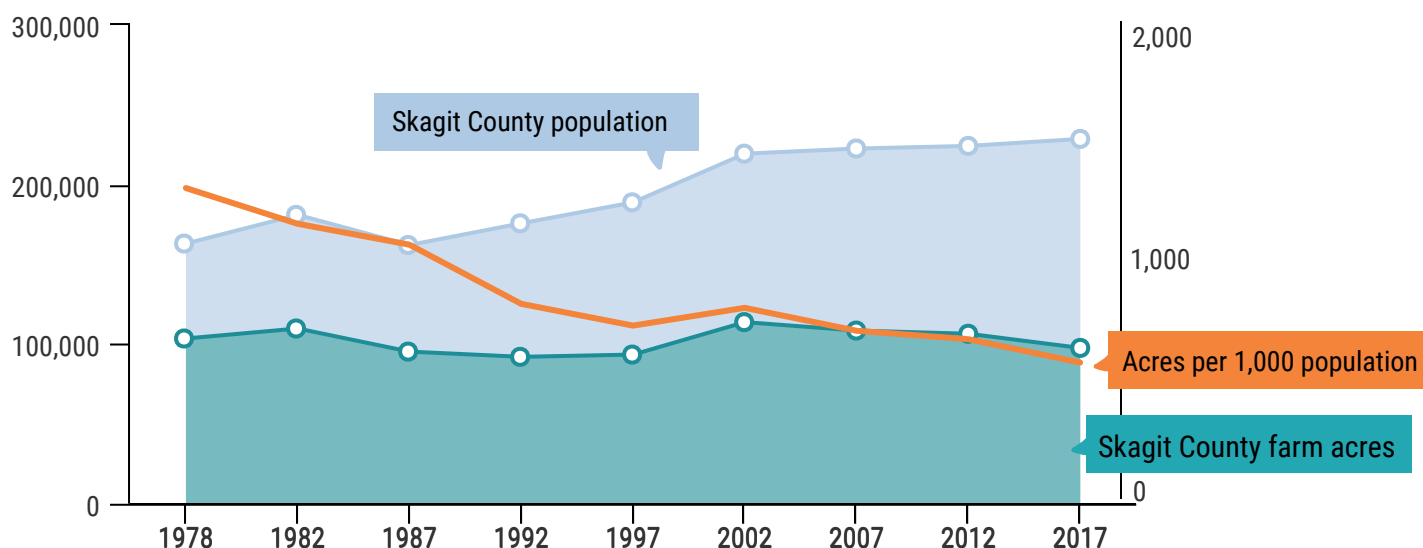
Figure 5. Percent of households below ALICE and FPL thresholds -- Skagit County, multiple years



Farmland

Availability of farmland is an important factor in terms of the space for food to be grown to support community needs. Forty years ago, available farmland exceeded the population of Skagit County. In the past three decades, population growth has outpaced that of farmland. In fact, the acreage per 1,000 Skagit County residents has steadily decreased over time (Figure 6).[8]

Figure 6. Farm acreage per 1,000 population -- Skagit County, 1978-2017



Food Deserts

Food security is influenced by geography, accessibility, and affordability. Access to grocery stores is not equitable across the country, including Skagit County. The “food deserts” that result are often located in neighborhoods without stores that provide healthy food options, or in areas where distance makes accessibility difficult (e.g., rural areas). According to the USDA, food deserts are often more likely to be in neighborhoods comprised of ethnic minorities as well as areas with a higher percentage of residents living in poverty.[9]

The most recent Food Desert Map compiled by the USDA (2019) shows that many areas of Skagit County have limited access to healthy foods. The map in Figure 7 shows census tracts in Skagit County highlighted in pink where at least one third of the population lives more than 1 mile (urban areas) or 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket. The extent of the issue becomes more apparent with the addition of a layer that shows areas where a significant number residents do not have access to a vehicle (Figure 8).

Figure 7. USDA Food Desert Map -- areas of low access to grocery stores in Skagit County (2019)

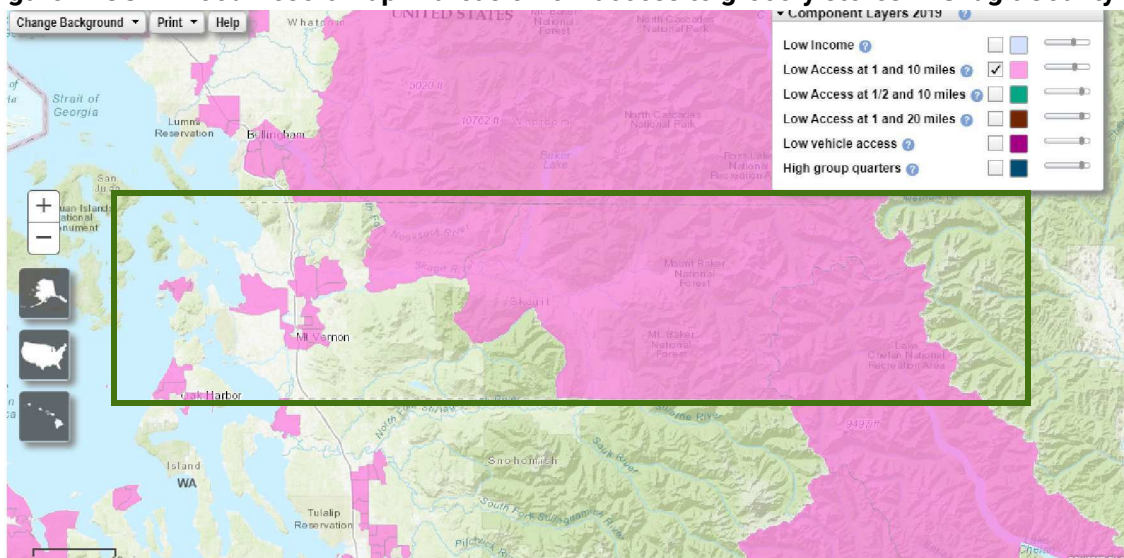
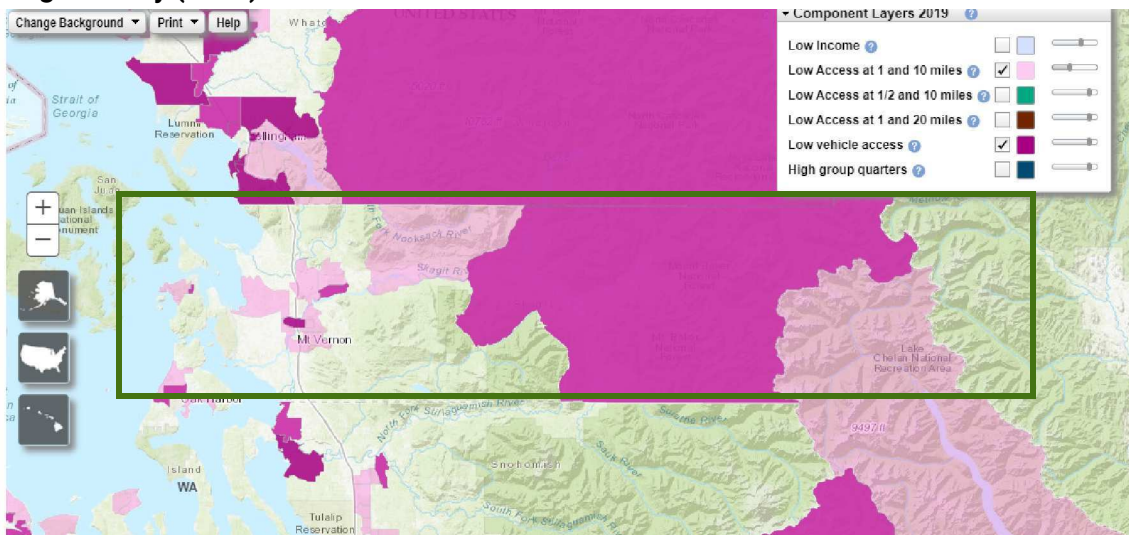


Figure 8. USDA Food Desert Map – Areas of low access to grocery stores overlaid with low vehicle access in Skagit County (2019)



The areas shaded in dark pink are locations where greater than 100 households do not have adequate access to vehicles to travel to grocery stores, farmers markets, or food banks to obtain food:

- East County - east of Hamilton
- South & southwest Sedro Woolley
- Northwest Mount Vernon
- Southeast Anacortes

Participation in Food Assistance Programs

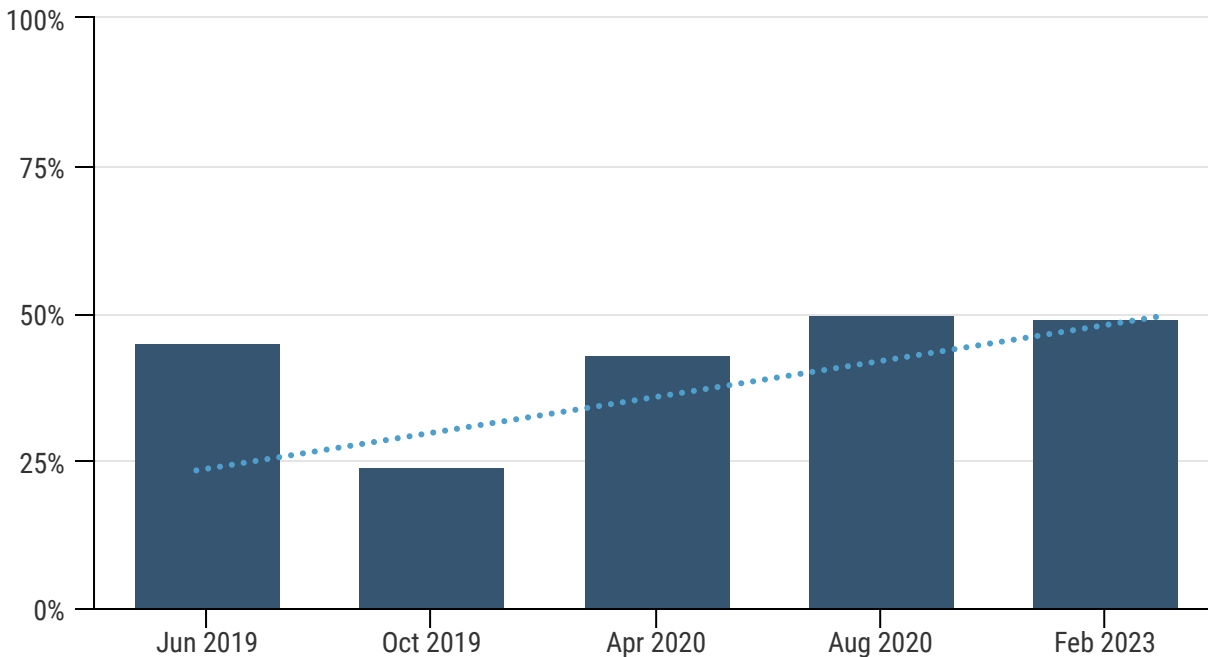
Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC)

The WIC program serves low-income (200% of the FPL) pregnant people, new and breastfeeding moms, infants, and children under age five who are at risk of not getting enough nutritious foods. Available benefits include supplemental nutritious foods, education and counseling, breastfeeding support, as well as screening and referrals to other services.

In Skagit County, recent gap analyses show that just under half of all persons who are eligible for WIC benefits are actually receiving them. This trend has been relatively consistent over the past three years (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Percent of people who qualify for WIC who receive benefits -- Skagit County, multiple years

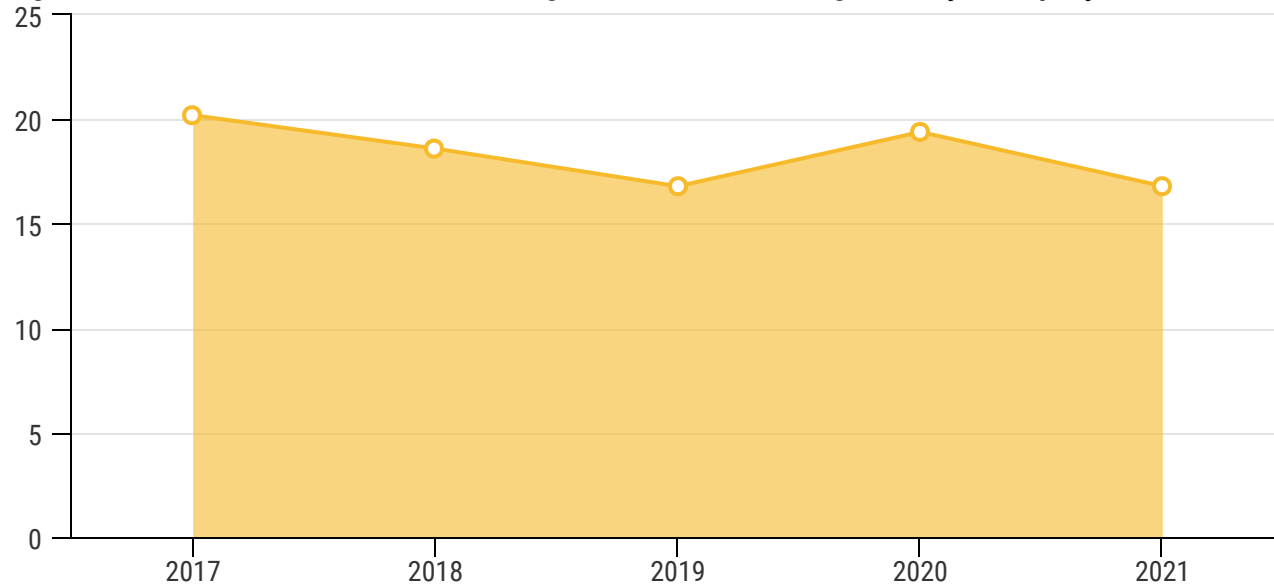


Less than half of Skagit County residents who qualify for WIC are receiving benefits.

Supplemental Nutritional Access Program (SNAP)

SNAP benefits (also known as Basic Food or EBT benefits) help people with low income (200% of FPL) make ends meet by providing a monthly benefit to buy food. In addition, qualification for Basic Food includes participation in the Free or Reduced School Meals Program for children within the household. Approximately 17% of Skagit County residents received SNAP during 2021, a decrease from 20% in 2017 (Figure 10). Of those households receiving benefits, 48% have children less than 18 years of age at home.

Figure 10. Percent of Households Receiving SNAP Benefits – Skagit County, multiple years



During the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP eligibility requirements were broadened in order to capture as many food insecure individuals as possible and provide some relief during this time. This pandemic related benefit lasted almost three years and was discontinued in February of 2023.[10]

Initial studies [11-13] indicate that the pandemic related benefit helped to ease food insecurity for many, but also found there were pandemic related issues that made accessing benefits difficult. It is too early to know the local impact of the increase in benefits to families, as well as changes that occurred when they were discontinued. Preliminary information from local food banks suggest that the discontinuation of pandemic food assistance benefits has increased community need at their food distribution centers (data not published).

Skagit County households receiving SNAP with children <18 years

48.2%

Median annual income of households receiving SNAP benefits

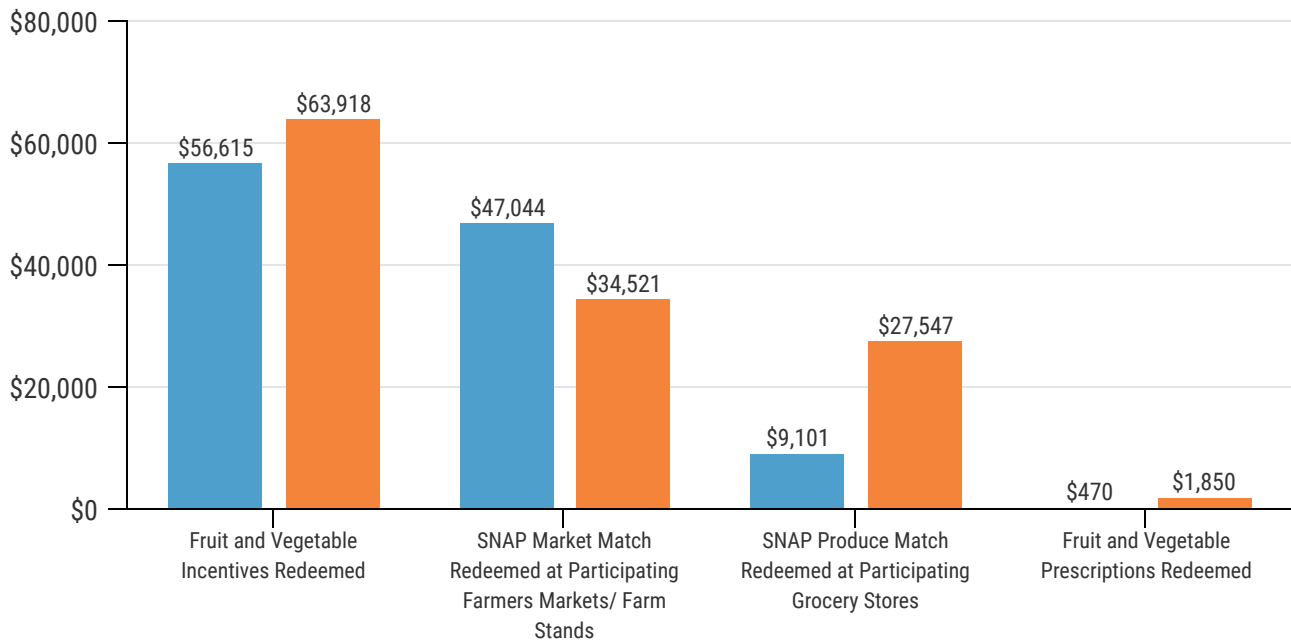
\$30,214



Supplemental Nutritional Access Program (SNAP) - continued

A number of related incentive programs exist that complement SNAP benefits, including SNAP Market Match and SNAP Produce Match. These programs increase the impact of SNAP benefits when fruits and vegetables are purchased at qualifying grocery stores and farmers markets. Both programs are in early phases, but initial data of Skagit County resident usage is encouraging (Figure 11).

Figure 11. WA Department of Health Fruit and Vegetable Incentive Programs -- Skagit County, 2021 vs. 2022



67%

Skagit County farmers markets participate in Market Match



16%

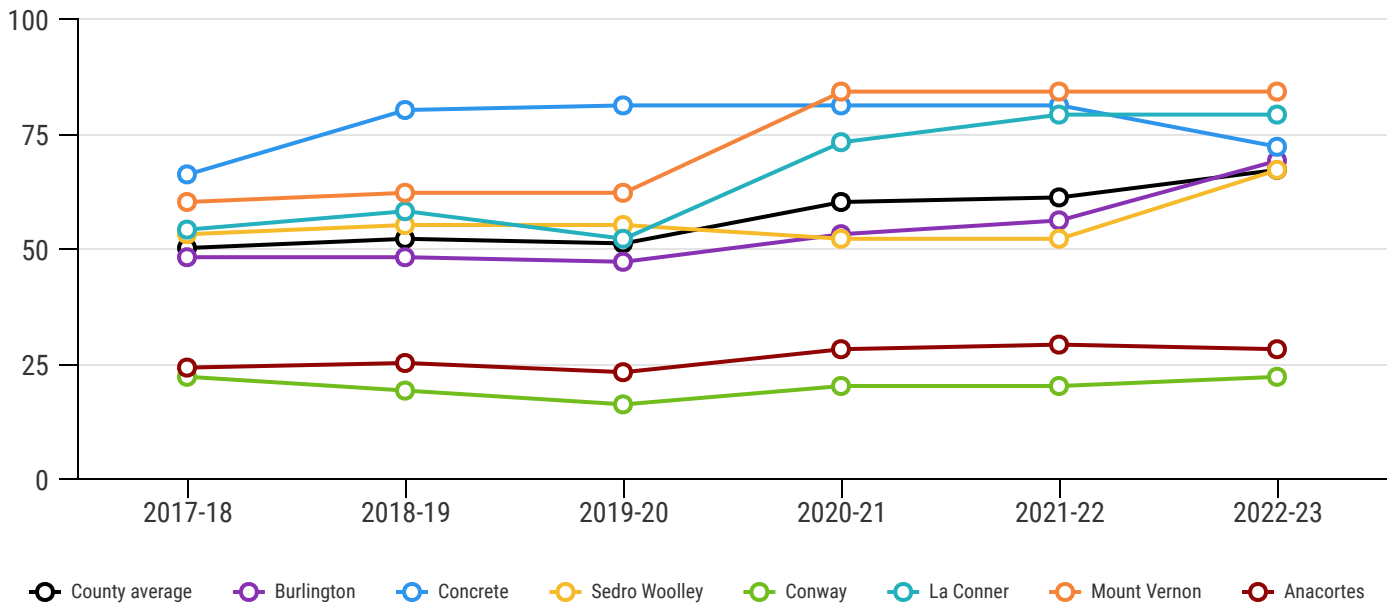
Skagit County grocery stores participate in Produce Match



Free and Reduced Meal School Programs

Households that qualify for SNAP are also eligible for Free or Reduced School Meals under the National School Lunch Program. Over the past six academic years, approximately half of all Skagit students qualified for this program, with much variation amongst school districts across the county (Figure 12). An increasing trend noted beginning with the 2020-2021 school year likely corresponds with a broadening of eligibility requirements for this program during the pandemic.

Figure 12. Percent of students who qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch by public school district – Skagit County, multiple years



In 2023, Governor Inslee signed a bill to expand the free lunch program to kindergarten through fourth grade students where at least 40% of the district is eligible for the program. These changes mean that five of seven school districts in Skagit County will qualify for free lunches.

Additional Child Nutrition programs exist to provide healthy and nutritious meals and snacks to children throughout the school day, including the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. This program provides supplemental fruit and vegetables separate from breakfast and lunch with a goal of creating a healthier school environment by promoting healthy food choices. For the 2023-2024 academic year, five elementary schools in Skagit County were awarded funding to implement the program.



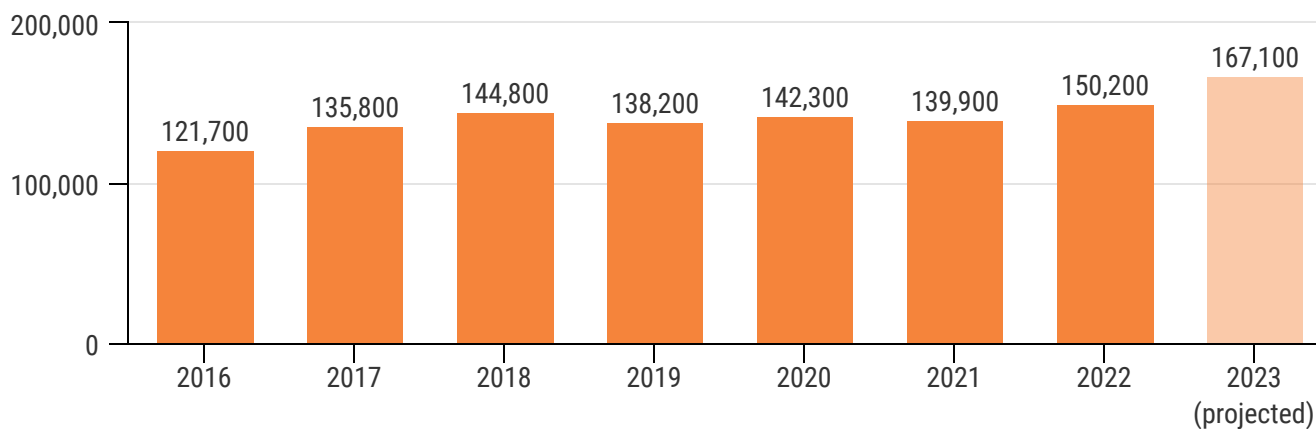
Supplemental Meals for Seniors

Two recognized programs exist for senior citizens in Skagit County: Meals on Wheels and community meals at Senior Centers. The Meals on Wheels Program provides low- or no-cost meals to homebound seniors throughout the county who are unable to prepare food for themselves due to a disability, lack of means, lack of knowledge/skill, or lack of incentive. Since 2017, the need has remained relatively stable; however, it has increased in the past two years and is projected to be the highest in history in 2023 (Figure 13).

Over 8,200 meals were served at Senior Centers between April 1, 2022 - May 1, 2023.

Community meals provided by five county senior centers offer an additional opportunity for nutritious food as well as social opportunities for older residents. Meals are provided on a donation basis for adults aged 60 and older, as well as spouses and caregivers. Over 8,200 meals were served between April 2022 and May 2023. Given the population projections for this age group (Figure 2), the demand is only expected to increase for both programs.

Figure 13. Meals delivered -- Skagit County Meals on Wheels Program, multiple years

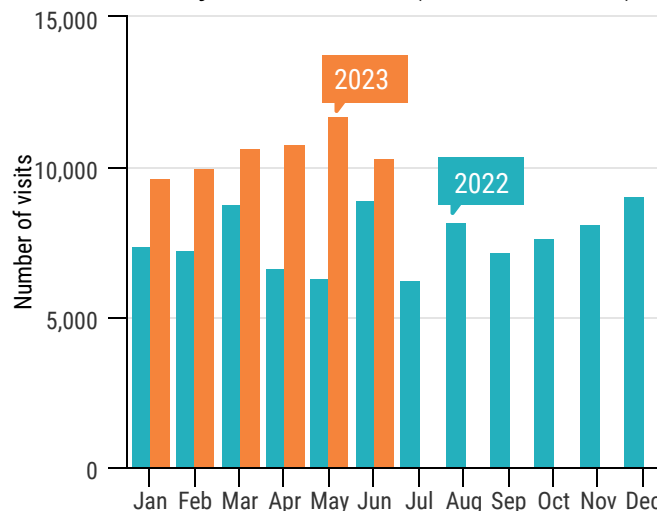


Food Banks

Food bank visit data was shared by Community Action Agency of Skagit County to establish a baseline for the community and follow future trends. There were an average of 10,500 visits to Skagit County food banks during the first six months of 2023, including an 8% increase from the first to second quarters. In addition, a significant increase in need was noted in the first six months of 2023 vs. those of 2022 (Figure 14).

Community food bank needs can vary throughout the year. As an example, temporary farmworker populations change with agricultural seasons. This may contribute to the increase in need observed in quarter two of 2023. It is also possible that the increase in need is related to the discontinuation of expanded pandemic benefits in February 2023.[10] This data will continue to be monitored moving forward.

Figure 14. Visits to local food banks -- Skagit County, 2022 vs. 2023 (as of June 2023)



Food Security and Health

Access to healthy foods is a social determinant of health. Areas where access to healthy food is scarce (e.g., food deserts) are often areas where poverty is also prevalent.

Food security is strongly connected to chronic health conditions and poor health outcomes. Studies suggest an association between lower food security and higher risk of some of the most common chronic conditions including hypertension (high blood pressure), asthma, diabetes, arthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and obesity (Table 1). The likelihood of having the condition increases as food security worsens.[14]

Table 1. Estimated percentage of adults 18+ years with a chronic disease by type – Skagit County, Washington State, United States 2021

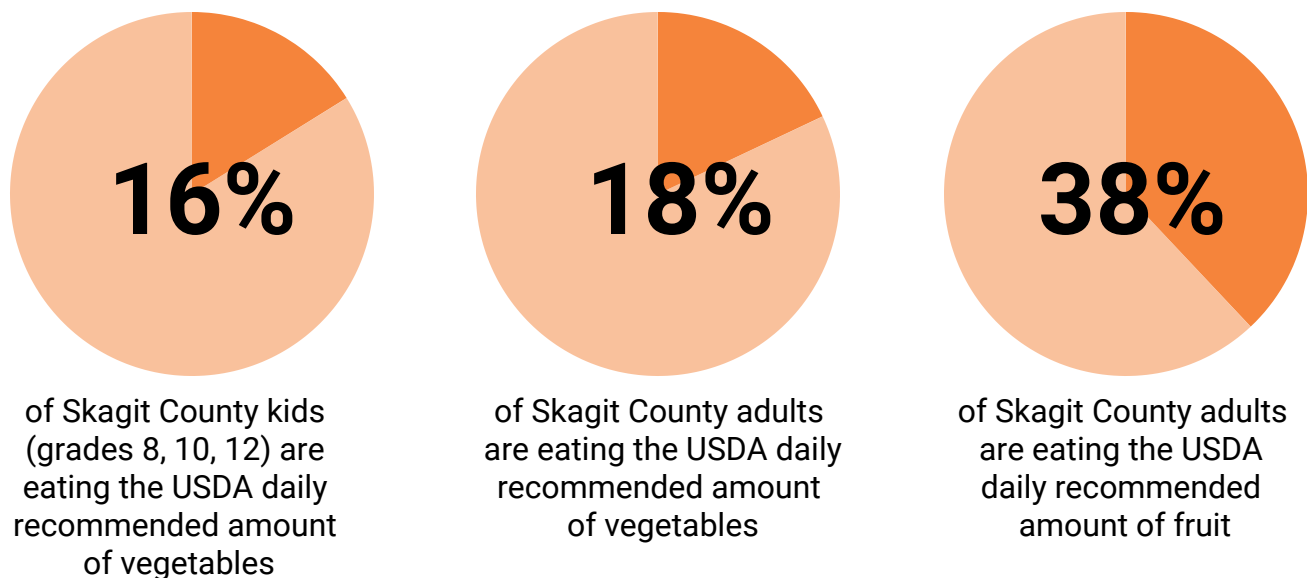
Condition	Skagit County	WA State	United States
Hypertension	33%	30%	32%
Asthma (current)	11%	11%	10%
Diabetes	10%	9%	11%
Arthritis	29%	25%	5%
COPD	7%	5%	6%
Obesity	30%	29%	34%

While food security research often points to obesity as an indicator of community health, the Food Security Workgroup was eager to present alternative health metrics that could show short-term progress, including fruit and vegetable consumption. Progress in changing behaviors towards food could eventually contribute to lowering obesity rates over time.

Data available from the Washington Healthy Youth Survey (HYS) and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) indicate areas of potential focus for future work in Skagit County (Figure 15).

CDC Places 2021 (based on BRFSS) for county data; BRFSS 2021 for WA and U.S. data.[11] Data are represented as crude rates

Figure 15. Skagit County residents are not eating enough fruits and vegetables



Food Security Survey

The extent of food security and specific needs of those who are affected has been difficult to assess in Skagit County. As a result, the Food Security Workgroup Steering Committee collaborated with Public Health to design a food security survey tool to obtain local and timely data (see Appendix I).

The survey resulted in 463 completed responses. Because intentional oversampling of the population experiencing low food security occurred, the results of the survey cannot be inferred to the entire Skagit County population. However, the survey did provide enough information to establish a baseline for beginning to understand the scope of food security in the county. Other potential limitations include:

- Sample size did not allow for much disaggregation amongst racial and ethnic groups.
- Geographic representation was difficult to obtain – which indicates the need for a wider distribution and outreach plan for future versions of the survey.
- Respondents often reported visiting multiple food bank locations, often traveling across the county or across county borders in order to have access to a site, so the volume of people served by a particular food bank is not indicative of the actual need in the specific location.
- Interpretation of some questions by respondents was likely unclear, i.e., some stated they were food secure because they visited a food bank or received Meals on Wheels rather than what their status would be if those resources were not available.



Through this survey tool, several new themes rose to the surface. Results also corroborated previous ideas relating to food security in Skagit County:

- The most common barrier to food access is the cost of food.
- In the past six months, those who identify as Hispanic or Latino are almost three times more likely to have skipped a meal due to food insecurity when compared to those who identify as white.
- Almost a third of respondents indicated that they have a medical or dental condition that affects their food choices.
- There is a need for additional services for those who visit food distribution centers; namely, dental services, clothing resources, mental health support.
- The survey included opportunities for open-ended responses. Analysis of these data indicated that there are clear opportunities for educational messaging on food access and resources in Skagit County.

Conclusion

This report provides an initial review of data currently available to summarize food security in Skagit County. The report establishes a baseline for the county and provides indicators that can be used to monitor changes over time. As data sources evolve, this information will be expanded whenever possible to continue to tell the story of food security in Skagit County.

No one indicator points to an overall solution to food security in Skagit County as there are so many factors that contribute to this issue. This quantitative review is a start towards identifying strategies that will address food security moving forward, as well as assist with data-driven decision making to meet the Food Security Goals outlined in the COVID Recovery Plan.

Notes

Food Security Survey Tool

The Food Security Survey was created with Survey Monkey. The survey was in English and Spanish, and was distributed in multiple ways to ensure a large enough sample size, as well as ample opportunities for access by the public.

- Public Health conducted in-person interviews at local food banks during scheduled distribution times.
- Paper copies of the survey were provided to County Senior Center locations and distributed to Meals on Wheels clients.
- Links to the survey were shared on Skagit County Public Health's social media platforms. In addition, the survey link was shared with Population Health Trust partners who were asked to distribute throughout their networks.
- Results were shared with partners in infographic form (Appendix 1).

Calculating Meal Costs

Figure 4 displays the annual average cost for a meal at the local, state, and federal level. This metric is from the USDA Map the Meal Gap Report [2], and is calculated as follows:

- Respondents of the U.S. Census Current Population Survey (CPS) were asked questions pertaining to food security. Those who were determined to be food secure were asked to provide the amount spent each week on food.
- After adjusting for the number of individuals in the household, the amount was divided by the number of meals eaten per week (21).

This per meal cost is therefore based on the experiences of those who are able to purchase enough food to be food secure.



Appendix I: Food Security Survey Summary



Of those who completed the survey:



To learn more about food security in Skagit County, Public Health administered a survey in the spring of 2023. The surveys were in English and Spanish, and outreach included visits to local food banks, senior centers, as well as providing paper surveys to Meals on Wheels clients, and links shared on social media. **A total of 463 completed responses were received.**

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