



**We're listening.
We're learning.**

FEEDING MI FAMILIES:

**Michigan Families' Lived
Experience of Food Access
and Food Assistance**



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Feeding MI Families
May, 2024



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Feeding MI Families Foreword

Do I have enough food to feed my children tonight? Can I afford to buy more?

Hundreds of thousands of Michigan parents have to ask themselves these questions every day. Some families will turn to government programs for help, some to food pantries, and some to friends and family. Others cannot access these resources, are too embarrassed to use them, or feel that others deserve the help more.

Food insecurity is not new to Michigan. But now, in a post-pandemic world of unprecedented inflation, high food prices, and the withdrawal of COVID-19 support, more and more families cannot make ends meet. New, creative solutions are needed to make inroads into this old problem.

We are listening. We are learning.

Parents experiencing food insecurity have incredible insights into how to feed their children. They know which programs and resources work for them—which will provide access to fresh and healthy food with dignity and respect. They also know which ones are missing the mark.

Many of these parents have seen how programs work in different places, have tried different resources at various points in their lives, and have thought deeply about how programs could be better. Yet, these parents are rarely invited to the table to be partners in change.

This lack of inclusion and connection means that community perceptions are often not fully understood by those who hold power. Opportunities to improve the experience and impact of food access and assistance are frequently missed.

The Powerful Voice of 1,300 Michigan Families

Based at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

and the Michigan Farm Bureau Family of Companies, Feeding MI Families centered parents' expertise to build parent-driven recommendations for improving Michigan's food assistance and healthy food access.

Over the last three years, we have listened to and learned from nearly 1,300 parents from Detroit, Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, and the state's 57 rural counties.

Some of what we learned did not come as a surprise. But, the pervasiveness of parent experiences and needs from Detroit's East Side to rural Keweenaw County is powerful. This consistency helps demonstrate that we need to do better. Other ideas from parents came at us like bolts of lightning—solutions that make so much sense, yet are not part of current advocacy efforts. We are honored that Michigan parents trusted us to elevate their voices.

Feeding MI Families Is Unique

From its inception, parents with lived experience of food insecurity were directly involved in Feeding MI Families through Parent Leadership Boards and by serving as project staff. Honesty and transparency were always at the heart of our relationships.

Parent leaders had to feel confident that their knowledge would be valued and used for change. They needed to know that Feeding MI Families was in it for the long haul, that we wouldn't swoop in, gather insight, and then take the praise for what we created in partnership.

Unlike many other efforts to evaluate food access and assistance, Feeding MI Families took a family lens, not a programmatic one. Instead of asking parents who use specific resources about their experience only with that resource, we learned from parents how they approach the complex network of food assistance in our state and how diverse resources fit the needs of their family. Through

“ I just think that it shouldn't be such a hard process for families to feed their children. — Mom of 6, Detroit ”

this process, we learned from those who never figured out how to access a resource, and those who had a bad experience and never came back, as well as those who were able to leverage the resource so they never needed it again.

Feeding MI Families is unique because it is objective—we are not affiliated with any resources we seek to impact. Early in our partnership with parents, it became clear that fear was embedded in many interactions between community members and food assistance. Latina mothers spoke of their fear of being detained because they were incorrectly identified as being undocumented at a food distribution site. Black mothers spoke of fear of being stopped by grocery store personnel with their children watching because they were suspected of shoplifting.

To openly and honestly share their knowledge with us, parents had to know that what they shared with us was safe, that we deeply valued their insights, and that we would fight for their stories to be heard, no matter what they had to say.

The Seemingly Impossible Becomes Possible

We may never be able to achieve many things parents have dreamed up and shared with us through this project. Programs to lift up families are perennially underfunded. Established policies and regulations can make requests seem unrealistic. Dramatic changes in our federal, state, and local food systems feel out of reach. But some things that seem impossible are not.

Michigan is already making incredible strides in helping families have access to safe and healthy food. Just a few years ago, providing free school meals to all Michigan children seemed like a pipe dream. Today, it is a reality. This year, our state eliminated restrictions on assets for individuals participating in the Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP), allowing families to build wealth. In 2024,

more than 700,000 Michigan families will be eligible for a larger tax credit on their earned income—a practice with proven benefits for family food security and diet quality.

Because we have seen these leaps forward, Feeding MI Families continues to dream big. We are dreaming of ways to help mothers with new jobs continue to keep their benefits until they get their feet under them. We are dreaming of ways to reduce a father's embarrassment when he uses his Bridge Card at a grocery store. We are dreaming of programs that have mutual benefits for the grandparents who want to feed their grandchildren fresh, colorful produce and the farmers who produce it.

Michigan can—and should—be a model for other states. We recognize the value of hearing community voices and investing in creative, user-driven solutions to food assistance. By taking action now, we can more fully reap the benefits of the investments we have already made to keep families healthy.

We all value our families and want to invest in our children. Food relates to everything else in our lives—our mental and physical health, ability to lead a fulfilling life, and capacity to do well in school and work. Food is central to the social fabric of our communities. By addressing food security and healthy food access more robustly, we can continue to support community flourishing across Michigan and beyond.



Kate Bauer, PhD, MS
Director, Feeding MI Families
Associate Professor, Nutritional Sciences
School of Public Health
University of Michigan

Feeding MI Families Supporters



**W.K.
KELLOGG
FOUNDATION®**

At the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, children are at the heart of everything we do. And we know that for children to thrive,

their families need to be working and their communities need to be equitable places of opportunity.

Access to nutritious, affordable food is essential for the well-being of children, their families, and communities. Unfortunately, across our state, food insecurity impacts many young children and families living in poverty and in the ALICE population (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). Additionally, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) families disproportionately suffer. There are existing programs aimed at addressing this issue – the most well-known being SNAP and WIC – but there is underutilization of available food assistance program resources. While administrators of these programs have theories about why families do not maximize their use, what has been missing from the discussion is the voice of past, current, and future users of those programs. This project went directly to the end users – families – and worked with them to define their needs, identify why these programs are under-utilized, and how they can be

changed to better meet needs. The work has implications at the regional, state, and federal level for the creation and implementation of food security policies and programs that are fully responsive to the expressed needs of communities.

At the Kellogg Foundation, we build our investments on our core values of what we call our DNA: racial equity and racial healing, leadership development, and authentic community engagement. The Feeding MI Families focus on families as equal partners to reduce racial disparities in food security is wholly in line with our core values – in particular, our commitment to authentic community engagement as a necessary condition to achieve race equity. The strength of this project is that it brought the voices of families who use food assistance programs directly into partnership with academia, government agencies, and policymakers. That is, it treats families' opinions and experiences as the primary source of information needed to change and/or create food support policies and programs. As the W.K. Kellogg Foundation keeps its eye on helping to create an equitable food system, projects like Feeding MI Families help to demonstrate one of the key ways that equity can be sustained.

Marijata Daniel-Echols, PhD, MPP
Program Officer

W.K. Kellogg Foundation





The Michigan Farm Bureau was founded by farmers who grow food every day for Michiganders. We work hard

to provide for and protect our neighbors, and we believe that involving parents is crucial to achieving equitable and sustainable change in food security. Elevating the experiences of those with personal insight into food insecurity is the first step to identifying and removing barriers that prevent children from getting the nutrition that they need to grow and thrive.

Rural communities experience disproportionate rates of food insecurity, and it's not always something that garners attention. Through our investment in Feeding MI Families, we wanted to ensure that the voices of rural parents were not left out of the conversation, in particular, so that we could learn about how experiences of childhood food insecurity vary in a rural vs urban setting. Feeding MI Families has opened our eyes to some of the more abstract influences, such as stigma and perceived discrimination, that prevent children and families across Michigan from getting the

food they need. In return, this has allowed us to think more holistically about how we can engage agriculture and our presence in Michigan communities in solutions that meet the needs of children and families where they are at.

The experiences and recommendations of our agricultural members and policyholders guide the work that we do at Farm Bureau every single day. Feeding MI Families is building awareness of the prevalence and experience of childhood food insecurity across our company and encourages those impacted to feel empowered to inform the work needed to create sustainable change. Within our family of companies, this research will help us identify how the facets of our organization can be connected and utilized to achieve solutions that eliminate childhood food insecurity.

At Farm Bureau, we live and breathe Michigan, and we know that by eliminating childhood food insecurity today, we can yield a more prosperous future for everyone in our great state.

Carl Bednarski
President
Michigan Farm Bureau Family of Companies



Introduction



Shortly after COVID-19 hit Michigan, the US Census' Household Pulse Survey provided some of the first data illustrating what many residents already knew—widespread school and childcare closures, employment losses, and illness had led to 1 out of every 4 Michigan parents worrying whether they could access enough food for their family.

Michigan was a model for other states in how we responded to these unprecedented rates of food insecurity. We were the first state to apply for the ability to distribute Pandemic EBT benefits to replace children's missed school meals, countless organizations quickly organized wide-reaching food distribution efforts, and hyperlocal "mutual aid" groups were developed providing informal assistance and filling gaps in the social safety net.

As the pandemic wore on, however, a more complicated picture of families' needs emerged. Many families, particularly those who identify as Black, Latino, and Native American, as well as those living in rural areas, still did not have enough to eat. Yet at the same time, many food assistance resources were underutilized. Organizations that previously had lines of people wrapping around the block to get food, now had few lining up. Further, some of the families that did come turned down food or threw some items away as they left. Similar trends could be seen in use of federal food assistance programs. For example, enrollment in Michigan's WIC program, which provides nutrition education and supplemental food, increased moderately in 2020, but then quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2021. This didn't make sense in a state where hundreds of thousands of children were still food insecure.

There is no doubt that organizations were doing their best to get food to families, but there were discrepancies between what programs were able to provide and what families needed and wanted. As our team looked deeper

though, we realized that this mismatch wasn't about the pandemic, it wasn't about the new constraints that organizations were working under, and it wasn't about the skyrocketing numbers of families that newly needed help. There has always been an unconscionable number of children in Michigan who go to sleep hungry, there have always been inequities in which Michigan parents have sufficient resources, and there have always been inadequacies in the policies and programs designed to ensure that families have consistent access to healthy food.

As we looked deeper, we also realized that there are few systematic efforts to listen to and learn from families experiencing food insecurity. And even more so, these families are rarely, if ever, allowed the position and power to have a voice in guiding how programs and policies are run. This was the genesis of Feeding MI Families.

We started putting together these pieces of the puzzle and saw a huge need for something grounded in families—elevating their perspectives and experiences. We realized, if we could reach out to families independent of the government or a specific program to create a space where parents feel valued, we could truly gain their perspectives and honest insights.

Parents have to navigate a wide range of systems, resources, and barriers to ensure that they have enough food. We wanted to understand how they look at the spectrum of opportunities available and make decisions about how to spend their precious time—what investments will be fruitful not only in terms of obtaining sufficient food, but supporting families' dignity, culture, beliefs, and wellbeing. Ultimately, we want to infuse the food security dialogue with authentic parent voices and identify programmatic and policy priorities that not only patch holes and address barriers in the existing safety net, but provide novel alternatives to existing structures and policies that address the legacy of inequality.

Fortunately, we are not alone in our recognition of the importance of learning from individuals with lived experience. Over the last few years, there have been increasing calls to more meaningfully include individuals with lived experience in food security efforts. Most notably, the 2022 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health invited individuals with lived experience to share their stories to inform federal strategy and investments. Closer to home, a key recommendation of Michigan's Food Security Council's 2022 Final Report was, "Understand and Support Michiganders Experiencing Hunger," including "increasing feedback from Michigan residents utilizing community food programs."

Our hope is that Feeding MI Families and the findings shared in this report begin to fill this need. Furthermore, we hope Feeding MI Families inspires change and motivates others to recognize that no decisions about how communities will be served should be made without meaningful and respectful community inclusion.

“

No one knows the
problem of hunger
better than the
people facing it.

Barbie Izquierdo

”



Facts, Figures & Acronyms

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity includes both being anxious that you will run out of food and actually running out of food and not being able to buy more. Some food insecure families may have enough food to survive, but not the quality and variety of food that they need to thrive. For families to be food secure, they need food to be both available and accessible.

Accessible includes:

- **Affordable**
Can I buy food with the resources I have?
- **Culturally Appropriate**
Is the food offered the kind of food I want to eat?
- **Safe to Eat**
Will I get sick from eating this food?
- **Safe to Access**
Is the food in a place where I am safe to travel?
- **Healthy**
Does the food support my mental and physical health?

In its more extreme forms, food insecurity includes consuming a limited quality or variety of foods due to financial limitations. At its most severe, families have to eat less, including skipping meals, because they do not have enough. Often, mothers

are the first to limit their portions and skip meals to ensure their children have enough. Meanwhile, children's meals become dominated by highly processed foods because they are inexpensive, widely available, and make children happy.

Food insecurity at all of these levels of severity can quickly impact mental health, family dynamics, and physical health. Apart from the quality of the food itself (what you eat), the impact of stress and fear on individuals' relationship with food (how you eat) is a critical driver of the negative health impacts of food insecurity. For those with limited resources, vicious cycles related to food are common:

- **Psychological Relationship with Food**
Thinking about food in any context can become compulsive and upsetting.
- **Physical Behaviors with Food**
Inconsistent access to food often leads to cycles of binge eating coupled with forced fasting.
- **Dysregulated Metabolism**
The above cycles increase individuals' risk of diabetes and other metabolic disorders.

Eliminating the anxiety around food and ensuring that a wide variety of high-quality, culturally appropriate food is available to families is necessary to break these cycles of stress, over- and under-eating, and poor health outcomes.

Acronyms Used in this Report

| | | | |
|-------------|---|--------------|--|
| USDA | United States Department of Agriculture | MDE | Michigan Department of Education |
| EBT | Electronic Balance Transfer | MDHHS | Michigan Department of Health and Human Services |
| FAP | Food Assistance Program | P-EBT | Pandemic EBT program |

Table 4-1

Food Insecurity in Michigan

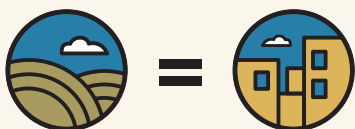


Overall, in 2022, **12% of Michigan households experienced food insecurity** to the point where their quality or quantity of food was limited, and they could not buy more.



Compared to other states, we rank 39th out of 50 in the prevalence of food insecurity and the proportion of Michiganders experiencing food insecurity is now higher than it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

This average rate of food insecurity, however, masks many differences in which Michiganders are food insecure. For example, while **1 in 10 non-Hispanic White residents** of Michigan experience food insecurity, **1 in 6 of our Hispanic/Latino residents** and **1 in 4 of our Black residents** are food insecure. This is worth repeating – **1 in 4 Black Michiganders do not have enough food to eat.**



Further, while we often think of poverty and food insecurity as concentrated in cities, **food insecurity rates are nearly equal in our state's urban and rural areas.** For example, 22% of children in both Wayne County and Roscommon County experience food insecurity.



1 in 9 Michiganders experienced food insecurity in 2021



1 in 8 Michigan children experienced food insecurity in 2021



1 in 7 in the Upper Peninsula experienced food insecurity in 2021



1 in 6 Hispanic/Latino Michiganders experienced food insecurity in 2021



1 in 5 Native Americans experience food insecurity



1 in 4 Black Michiganders experienced food insecurity in 2021



1 in 3 households with a member out of the labor force due to disability experience food insecurity

Figure 4-1

| | | | |
|-----------------|---|------------|---|
| SNAP | Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program | WIC | Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children |
| SSI/SSDI | Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance | UP | Upper Peninsula |

Table 4-1 (cont.)

Feeding MI Families Project Approaches

Guided by the principles of Community Based Participatory Research, Feeding MI Families worked to achieve its goal of elevating the experiences, perspectives, and needs of Michigan's families experiencing food insecurity through 4 stages:

- Parent Leadership Board Engagement
- Text and Phone-Based Surveys
- In-Depth Interviews
- Developing Parent-Driven Recommendations for Policy and Practice Change

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Feeding MI Families was first established to engage parents in Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Battle Creek. A second infusion of support from the Michigan Farm Bureau Family of Companies allowed us to expand our work to include parents across Michigan's rural counties. This dual focus allowed us to learn from many parents across Michigan and gain insight into similarities and differences in families' experiences and needs.

Parent Leadership Boards

Parent engagement is the foundation of Feeding MI Families. To accomplish this, we convened three Parent Leadership Boards, two for our urban project (one operating fully in English and one operating fully in Spanish) and one for our rural project. Parents participating in the Parent Leadership Boards all self-identified as a parent (including biological mothers and fathers, adoptive mothers, and grandparents) and experienced food insecurity at some point in their lives. We recruited these parents through existing relationships with community organizations and recommendations from other parents.

Our first several meetings with our Parent Leadership Boards, occurring via Zoom and in person, focused on relationship building, establishing trust, effective communication, and ensuring an inclusive team culture. We had hard conversations – Why was this a project funded through a university versus community-grown? Why was a white woman leading the project, not women of color who are well aware of the solutions that their communities need? Did we mean it when we said we wanted parent leaders, or was this going to be another effort that came into communities in need and took what they needed, not investing? Together, we worked through these conversations, building humility and new friendships.

Our Parent Leadership Boards had many responsibilities over the life of the project. Parent Leaders were responsible for identifying and prioritizing project objectives, strengthening approaches to recruit other families to engage with the project, partnering with project staff to guide data interpretation, and leading critical conversations about project findings with policymakers, influencers, and community members.

In recognition of our Parent Leaders' expertise and contributions, they were all paid fairly for the time they contributed to the project.

Text- and Phone-Based Surveys

To understand how Michigan families facing food insecurity engaged with diverse food assistance resources, we developed a survey for parents to complete via text message or phone between November 2022 and June 2023. To ensure that project findings reflected Michigan's diversity, we set goals to include a specific number of parents from each city (Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Battle Creek) and each rural region of the state. Input from the Parent Leadership Boards was essential to refine our advertising about the survey.

Parent Leaders refined our project logo and branding, social media ads, flyers, and postcards. Our Parent Leaders then distributed our recruitment materials through their personal and professional networks, and our study team also shared the materials via email and mail with hundreds of family-serving organizations within our communities of interest.

Parents completing our survey had to meet the following requirements:

- They had to self-identify as a parent. This means that parents, grandparents, foster parents, and other guardians were welcome.
- They had to reside in a zip code within our communities of interest.
- They had to respond affirmatively to 1 of 2 standard questions assessing food insufficiency:
 - In the past 12 months, have you ever worried that your family's food would run out?
 - In the last 12 months, did the food you bought ever not last and you weren't able to buy more?

Additionally, restrictions were set in our software to only allow each individual to participate once. We also prohibited individuals using Voice Over IP texting providers from participating. We made this decision because individuals looking to commit fraud and complete the survey multiple times can easily create multiple unique phone numbers through VOIP services. Our Parent Leadership Boards confirmed with friends and families in their communities that nearly 100% of individuals had a cell phone from one of the allowed providers.

The screening questions and the subsequent survey were offered in English and Spanish. Parents texted the word FOOD or COMIDA, based on their language of preference, to our





study phone number to begin the survey and determine if they were eligible to participate. They would immediately get information about Feeding MI Families and our screening questions. We implemented the text messaging in partnership with Mosio, a two-way text messaging company specializing in mobile solutions for research. If parents were eligible to participate, they were given the option to continue sharing information via text or have a study staff member call them so they could complete the survey over the phone. If parents responded that they wanted to participate by text, they were automatically progressed through questions assessing their families' use of food assistance programs, satisfaction with these programs, and reasons for using or not using programs. The complete list of screening and survey questions is provided in Appendix A. The quality of information parents shared in their surveys was like nothing we had seen before. We realized that parents today feel extremely comfortable texting, perhaps more comfortable than completing surveys using our standard methods, such as a web-based platform. Parents who opted to complete the survey over the phone received a call from one of our staff members, fluent in English or Spanish, within 1-2 business days. Parents who completed the survey received a \$25 gift card via email or mail. The surveys were closed to parents from specific cities/regions as we reached our goals for those areas.

Data collected through our surveys were organized and reconciled by our team. Our data analyst completed all of the statistical analyses presented in this report. Organizing and interpreting parents' responses to our open-ended questions was a whole-team effort and included the Parent Leadership Boards. Using standard approaches to qualitative data analysis, we reviewed the range of responses that parents provided to each question, developed themes that represented their responses, and then used qualitative analysis software to apply the themes to every response to every question. Responses from our Spanish-speaking parents were kept in Spanish during the coding process to avoid losing any nuances through translation.

In-Depth Interviews

To ensure that we captured the nuances and depth of parents' experiences with food assistance and their ideas for improving it, we completed interviews with 187 parents who had completed our survey and responded affirmatively to a question about whether they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. Overall, over 90% of parents completing the survey said they would like to complete an interview, so we only completed interviews with a subset of those interested. We completed the interviews via phone, Zoom, or WhatsApp, depending on the parent's preference, by

interviewers trained in respectful and engaging interview techniques. The interviews were audio recorded, and project staff reviewed a subset of recordings to provide interviewers' feedback on their approaches and engagement.

We developed the interview questions in collaboration with the Parent Leadership Boards. Appendix B contains the complete list of questions. Questions followed up on the feedback parents gave us in their survey and sought to elicit greater detail about parent perspectives on the food assistance programs they have used, as well as experiences of mistreatment or discrimination that they have experienced related to using food assistance. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that interviewers aimed to ask parents all of the questions but respectfully asked personalized follow-up questions that allowed for a natural conversation, and parents could guide the discussion to include topics not covered. Parents received an additional \$50 for participating in the interviews.



After the interviews were completed, each audio recording was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. We then approached the qualitative coding process by, similar to our survey coding process, generating a list of themes in parents' responses to the questions

and having two trained staff members review each transcript to apply themes to the parents' responses. Like with survey response coding, we kept responses from our Spanish-speaking parents in Spanish during the coding process.

Developing Parent-Driven Recommendations for Policy and Practice Change

This work resulted in an incredible collection of stories, feedback, ideas, and experiences about food assistance and food insecurity shared with honesty and transparency by Michigan parents. As you will see as you read through our findings, some of the experiences of our parents have been heard many times before—food assistance is not enough, families are still not able to make ends meet, and it is too difficult for many parents to get and maintain food benefits. Although this knowledge is not new, we hope the consistency and veracity of parents' experience will motivate action. Other experiences and ideas shared by parents have rarely been heard before, perhaps due to parents' shame from persistent stigma and discrimination against people experiencing poverty and relying on government assistance. We are so proud that Feeding MI Families can bring this knowledge to light.

Throughout the sections of this report, you will see that our parent-driven recommendations for change fall within one of three themes:

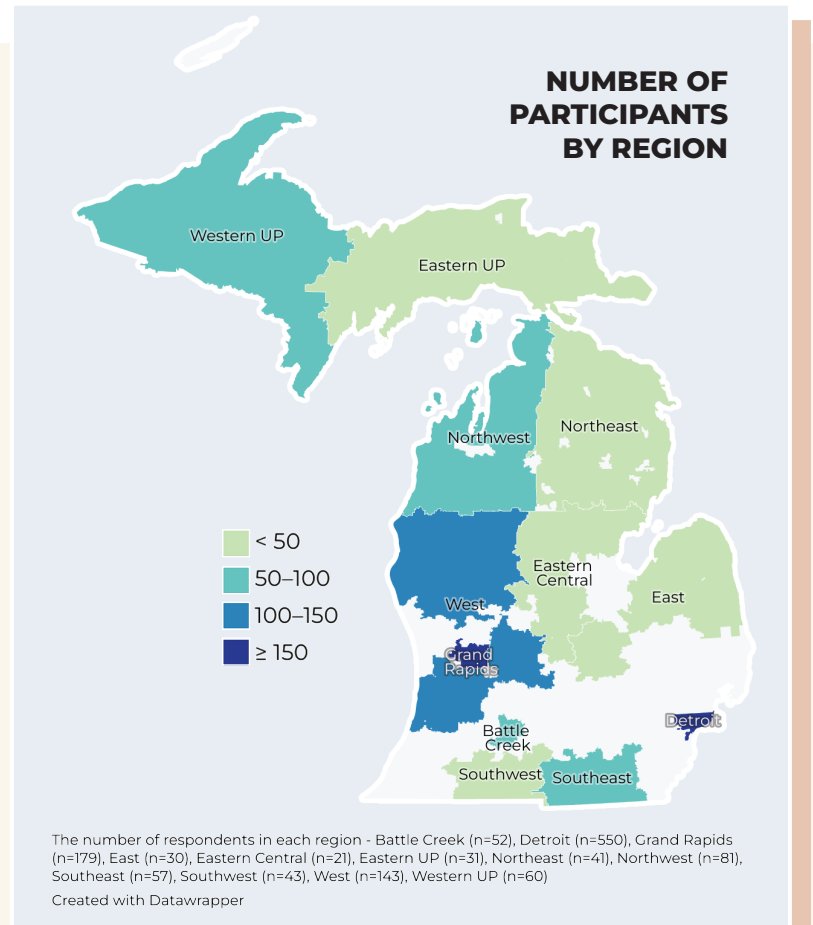
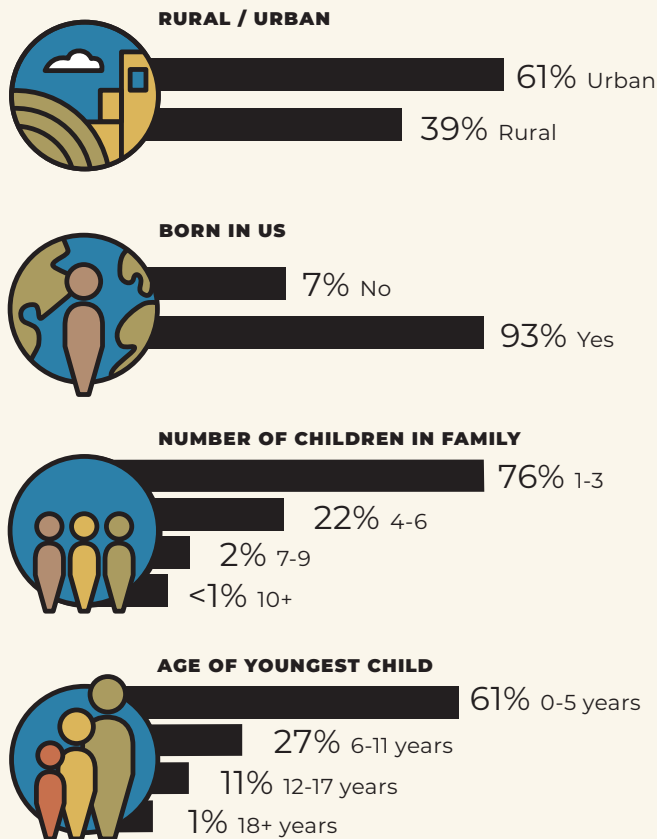
- Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security
- Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families
- Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

We identified these themes in partnership with our Parent Leadership Boards and feel they capture the heart of what Michigan families experiencing food insecurity want those in power to know and take action on.

Participating Families' Demographics

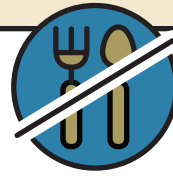
Between November 2022 and June 2023, Feeding MI Families engaged 1,289 parents experiencing food insecurity from across Michigan. Feeding MI Families' families reflect the incredible diversity, strengths, and needs of Michiganders experiencing food insecurity in both our cities and rural counties. Thanks in large part to the engagement efforts of our Parent Leaders and community partners, Feeding MI Families was able to capture the experiences of and learn from parents of diverse races, ethnicities, genders, family sizes, and countries of origin.

Most participating parents were female, which is not surprising as mothers often shoulder the responsibility of family food insecurity. Thirty-two percent of families self-identified as having a family member with a disability, 22% spoke a language other than English at home, and 7% shared that they did not currently have a permanent, regular, and safe place to live. These conditions create incredible challenges for families, limiting their ability to access safe and healthy food.



98%

have worried that their family's food would run out in the past 12 months



FOOD INSECURE

80%

have run out of food in the past 12 months



GENDER

92%

of participants were female

DISABILITY IN FAMILY



32%

have a family member with a disability

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY



2.7

average number of children

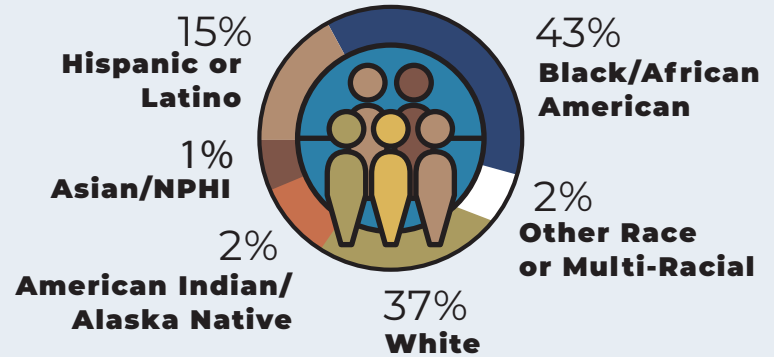
AGE



5 yrs

average age of youngest child

RACE/ETHNICITY



SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH



22%

speak a language other than English at home

SAFE, CONSISTENT HOUSING



7%

do not have a permanent, regular, and safe place to live

Figures 6-1



“ I just really hope that by you guys doing this, like, somebody is really going to listen to it and try to figure it out, and try to fix the system. — Mom of 3, Grand Rapids ”

Family Profile:

MEET THE BLAKEMORE FAMILY



Morgan Blakemore grew up on a farm in tiny Sand Creek, Michigan. Raised by sensible parents, she and her sisters were taught the value of hard work. Today, she and her husband live in the very community she grew up in, but the hard work no longer supports their dreams. “I am doing everything I am supposed to as a citizen, and it is so frustrating that we are struggling.” Morgan works full-time for her county’s vital records department and as a coach at a local gym. At the same time, her husband is a technician for an internet service provider. Their children, ages seven and three, are in school and daycare.

“I never thought that in my 30s I’d have these problems. Every decision is stressful; we budget so hard and don’t qualify for assistance.” While money felt tight for the last few years, it was post-COVID when the cost of living dramatically changed. Despite some economic recovery, the things the family eats most—fresh fruit, chicken, and milk—are exceedingly expensive. Morgan tries to spend about \$100 per week for her family of four. Still, most weeks, it’s closer to \$170, even after cutting out all but the necessities, including breakfast for herself. “I could probably cut back more, but feeding my family healthy is a big priority. We eat dinner

together every night, and I focus on those meals. It’s okay for the adults to sacrifice if the kids eat as healthy as possible.”

To stay on budget, the family never goes out to eat and tries to take advantage of no-cost family activities. Morgan notes, “We’ve had to get a lot more creative, but I want the kids to feel like we are making memories and not like they are going without.” The Blakemore kids are young, but Morgan feels they need to be honest about the situation: “I don’t want them to feel the stress or struggle, but we talk about unrealistic expectations and making good choices. I want them to have a solid foundation.”

While it’s sad that many of Blakemore’s friends are experiencing the same hardships, and that it is so common among those in their age group, Morgan feels fortunate that she can be open about the difficulties with good friends. What often comes up in conversation is the hope that those with the power to make decisions in Michigan will take a deeper look and find ways to support hard-working individuals who are doing all the right things and still falling behind.



Michigan Families' Experiences with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program/ Food Assistance Program (SNAP/FAP)

SNAP/FAP Summary

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the country's largest food assistance program, serving as a critical component of the country's social safety net to address food insecurity. SNAP is administered federally by the USDA and here in Michigan is called the Food Assistance Program (FAP) and administered by MDHHS. Commonly, however, families refer to the program as "food stamps" (or just "stamps"), the program's former name. Compared to many other states, Michigan is quite successful at ensuring that those eligible participate in SNAP/FAP; 89% of eligible Michiganders participate in the program. Overall, 13% of Michigan residents participate in SNAP/FAP, and more than 61% of Michigan households participating in SNAP/FAP include children.

Eligibility for the program and the amount of benefits families receive are determined by household income relative to household size, with benefits adjusted annually to account for inflation. For example, currently, a family of 3 can receive SNAP/FAP benefits if their gross monthly income is less than \$2,694 per month, or \$32,328 per year. On average, families receive \$189 in benefits per household member per month. However, particularly with the high food prices throughout and after COVID-19, many families find their benefits run about mid-way through the month. Until recently, households were limited in the amount of assets they could have to be eligible for SNAP/FAP, discouraging families from saving. However, Michigan removed this asset limit in 2023, allowing families to build savings.

If you are approved to participate in SNAP/FAP, you receive an EBT card (known as a Bridge Card in Michigan), which is loaded monthly with money that you can use to purchase eligible foods and beverages at authorized retailers. Some Michigan retailers additionally participate

“

I feel like working mothers, working families, are penalized for working. As soon as you start a new job, they want to take the food assistance from you when you really haven't even got fully in the job.

—— Mom of 3,
Detroit

”



in the Double Up Food Bucks program, which matches the amount of money that Bridge Card users spend on fruits and vegetables up to \$20 a day, allowing families to expand the amount of produce they are able to buy. Bridge Card holders can also now purchase food and beverages online for curbside pickup or delivery. However, families must pay for any delivery and service fees out of their own pockets, which limits the accessibility of this benefit.

SNAP/FAP has many well-established benefits for children, families, and communities. SNAP/FAP is proven to reduce the likelihood that families experience food insecurity and lifts many families out of poverty. SNAP/FAP benefits also inject funds directly into the economy, as recipients spend their benefits on food at local grocery stores and markets, positively impacting local businesses.

Feeding MI Families Findings: SNAP/FAP

Parents participating in Feeding MI Families were asked, “SNAP (also known as food stamps) is a program that provides families money to purchase food using an EBT/Bridge Card.

Has your family used SNAP (food stamps) in the past year?” If parents responded no to this question, they were then asked, “Has your family ever used SNAP (food stamps)?”

Figure 7-1 shows that 66% of parents reported that their family has participated in the program in the past year, 21% reported that they previously participated, and only 13% reported that they have never participated. The percentage of families participating in SNAP varies widely by family location, race/ethnicity, US nativity, household disability status, and access to safe, consistent housing. These differences may reflect underlying economic and, therefore, eligibility differences. Additionally, unlike WIC, undocumented individuals are not eligible to participate in SNAP/FAP, contributing to lower participation among Hispanic/Latino families and parents not born in the US.

Among those reporting never participating in SNAP/FAP, we asked, “What are some reasons that your family has not used

SNAP (food stamps)?” Figure 7-2 shows the range of responses that we received. The vast majority believed

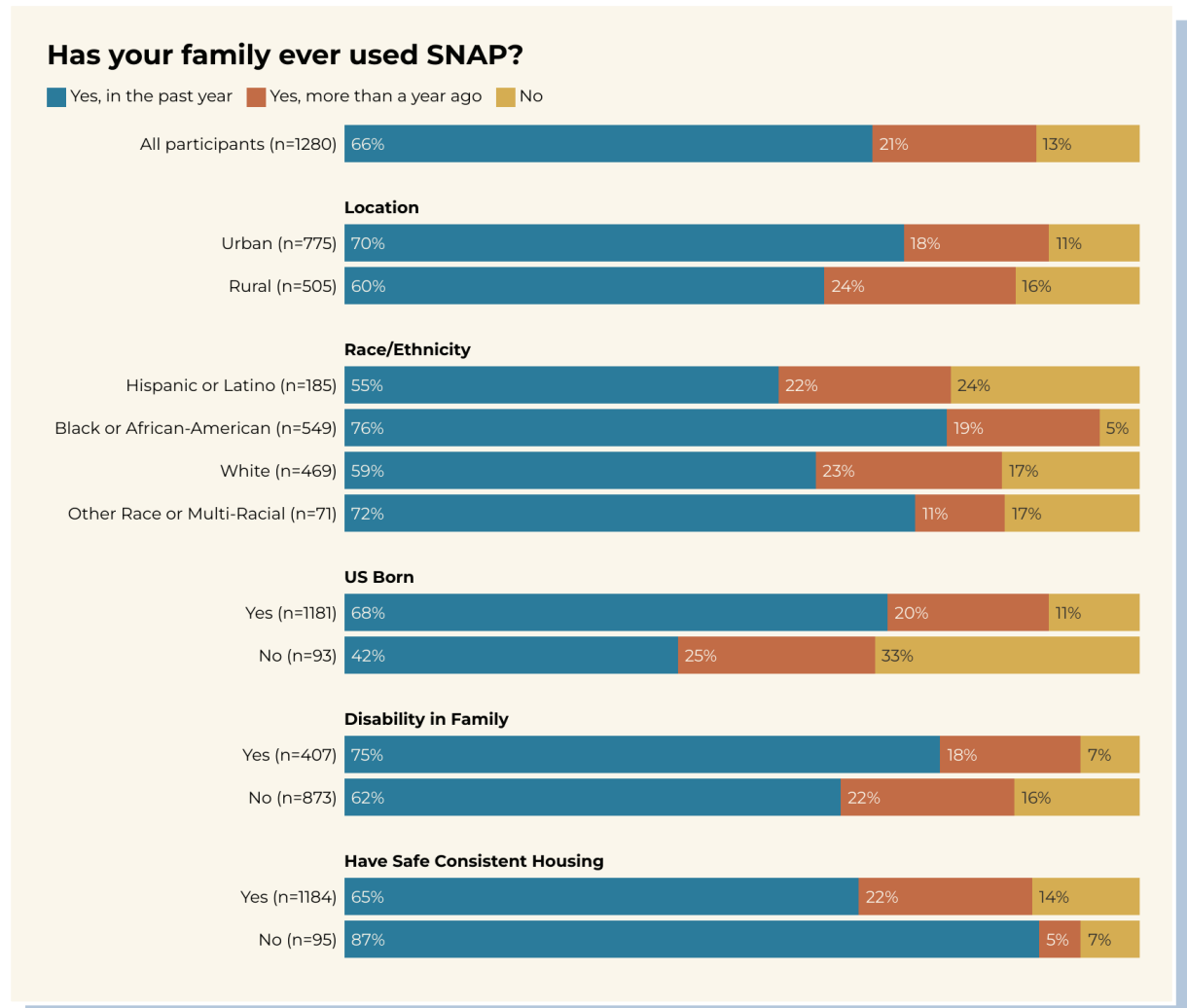
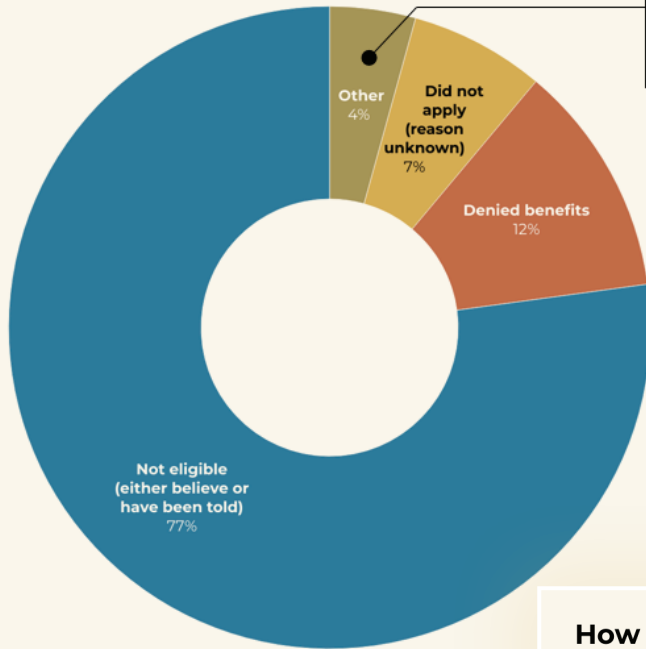


Figure 7-1

Why hasn't your family used SNAP?



2% - Unsure how to apply
 1% - Concerned about child support requirement
 1% - Time required to apply
 1% - Shame, embarrassment, judgement, etc.

Note: Parents may have stated multiple reasons.

Figure 7-2

“

Every 6 months we have a review [for SNAP eligibility] and for some reason it never goes thru and we end up losing them [benefits] for a month.

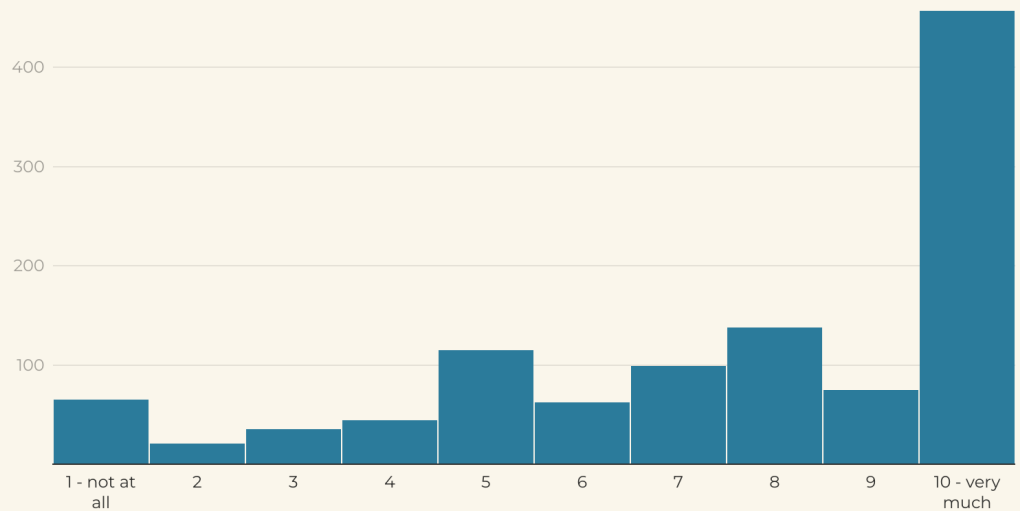
Mom of 3, southeast MI

”

How satisfied are you with SNAP?

Asked of all participants who currently or previously participated in SNAP

500 participants



“

The application process [for SNAP] was extremely difficult. I had to apply six or seven different times before I was even approved. I only make 13 bucks an hour and I only get \$23 a month of food stamps.

Mom of 1, Battle Creek

”

they were not eligible or had been told they were not eligible for the program. Similarly, many have been denied by the program.

We then asked parents who have participated in SNAP/FAP, “On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with SNAP (food stamps)?” Figure 7-3 shows the distribution of parents’ responses and Figure 7-4 shows similarities in average satisfaction across sociodemographic groups.

Across all of the food assistance programs that Feeding MI Families asked about, average satisfaction was the lowest for SNAP/FAP. Providing insight into how to improve the program, parents who had participated in SNAP/FAP were asked, “How can SNAP (food stamps) be improved?” We identified several themes in parents’ responses, which are presented in Table 7-1.

By far, the most common response we heard from parents was that the benefits should increase; the amount provided is insufficient to supplement most families’ food budgets, leaving many still without. Many parents also felt that relying on gross income to determine eligibility does not adequately reflect their families’ expenses and true financial status. For example, a family may make just above the gross income cutoff, but with medical expenses, housing costs, and the price of childcare, little is left for food. Finally, many parents shared that communicating with MDHHS about their eligibility and benefits can be very frustrating, time-consuming, and ineffective. Related, while some parents noted having extremely helpful case workers guiding them through the process of receiving benefits, many others noted that their interactions with case workers left them feeling ashamed and diminished.

Average SNAP Satisfaction

On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with SNAP?

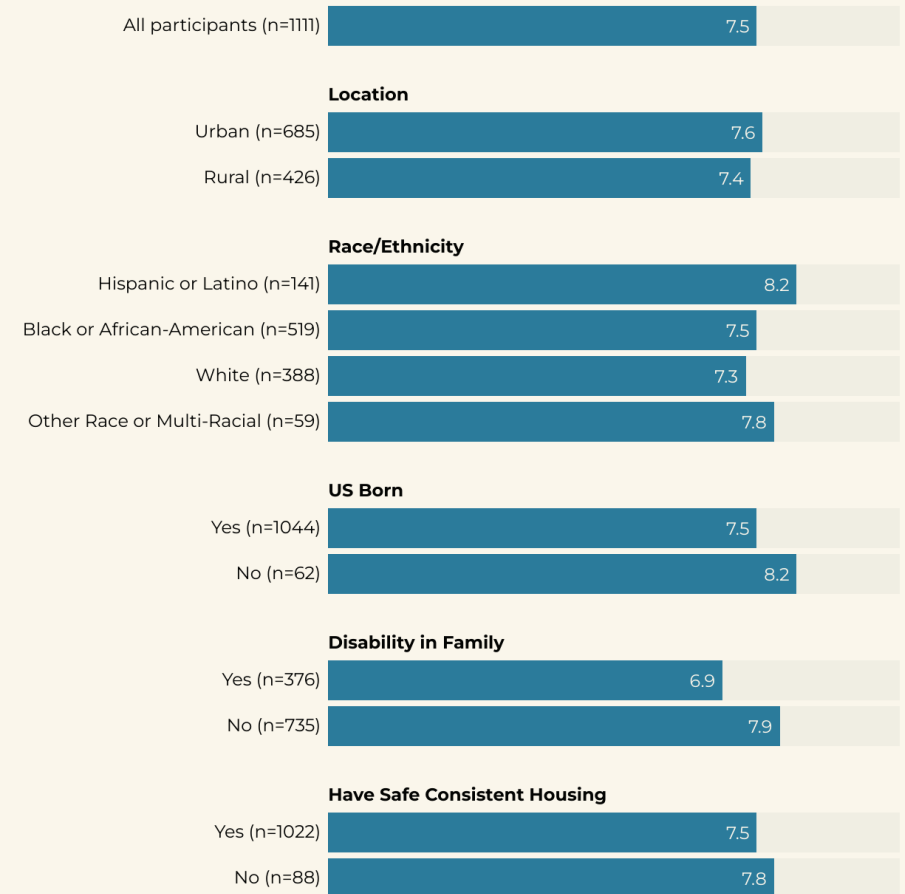


Figure 7-4

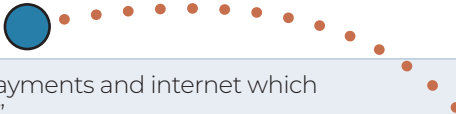
| Participants' Answers to "How Can SNAP Be Improved?" | # OF RESPONSES | QUOTES |
|---|----------------|--|
| Increase benefits | 347 |  |
| Improve calculation of household income to reflect true expenses | 211 | "Take into account other bills like car payments and internet which are essential in many households now." |
| Improve application, eligibility, and renewal process including more clearly communicating about problems | 132 | "If someone needs help, help them, and stop making them go through hoops to receive the help they need." |
| Increase income cutoff | 114 | "Increasing the income. We make \$200 over the limit and still struggle to make ends meet with groceries. Sometimes our diet consists of hot dogs and Mac n cheese. I want my kids to eat healthier, but towards the middle end of the month we cannot afford groceries after paying bills." |
| Improve caseworker communication and interactions | 72 | "Communication with MDHHS workers needs to drastically improve; as well as their professionalism, sense of urgency and time period of mail services vs. deadlines for paperwork." |
| Provide payments more frequently | 42 | "They should split it up where you can get it twice a month." |
| Maintain benefits after client begins working | 34 | "Provide working parents with extra help, just because we make a certain amount, barely living, doesn't mean 17.00 an hour covers everything." |
| Expand eligible items | 27 | "You should be able to use it on cooked food in the grocery store." |
| Increase ability to use EBT online | 18 | "[Using the card online] is not the easiest option, and you still have to pay for shipping costs or you need to be part of a loyalty program." |
| Remove administrative restrictions | 16 | "I don't get stamps because I'm separated from my spouse but they still want his info." |
| Improve the shopping experience | 14 | "While shopping- when you check out it displays on the screen that you're using EBT for everyone behind you to see." |
| Incentivize healthy purchases | 12 | "More fruits and vegetables incentives." |
| Improve the app | 8 | "More accessible to all and easier app to use." |
| Provide education | 5 | "Show users how to purchase groceries, store food, ways to save for food and ween off of the program." |
| Increase EBT card security | 3 | "Make it harder for someone to steal your card info and use it. Or allow the victim to be reimbursed." |

Table 7-1

Top Recommendations for SNAP/FAP Improvement

Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security

1. Parents report negative interactions with SNAP/FAP case workers that leave them feeling disrespected and less likely to pursue benefits. Case workers would benefit from greater support and more manageable caseloads, allowing them to engage in respectful and comprehensive interactions with clients.
2. Parents are frequently the target of stigmatizing interactions when shopping with their Bridge Card. Improvements in staff training; flexibility to pay with EBT through self-checkout, online, and “pay while you shop” options; and a more discreet design for the Bridge Card would all improve families’ shopping experience.



“The cost of food has gone way up, there needs to be a permanent increase every time the price of food goes up.”

Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families

1. Allowable deductions to determine SNAP/FAP benefits do not accurately reflect families’ expenses. Modifications to what expenses families are able to deduct from their gross income and increasing the maximum deduction allowed would provide families with greater benefits, which are desperately needed.
2. Current benefit levels, particularly for families with household incomes just below the eligibility line, are not sufficient. State programs that expand or increase federal SNAP funding could help bridge the gap.
3. Michigan should make use of all possible SNAP state options and waivers to bring the maximum federal SNAP dollars to the state and support more families.
4. A “Bridge off SNAP” program that continued families’ benefits for a limited period after parents begin working or receive a raise would give families time to get on their feet and pay off debts, increasing the likelihood that they remain employed.

Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

1. Parents are strongly supportive of nutrition incentive programs, such as Double Up Food Bucks, and would like to see these programs be consistently offered at more retailers across the state.
2. Parents want to shop for local products, but food prices are much higher at their small, local grocery stores versus large chain stores further away. When parents receive more SNAP/FAP benefits, they are able to shop locally.



Michigan Families' Experiences with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

WIC Summary

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a targeted nutrition program that supports pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5. Families must also have a household income at or below 185% of the federal poverty line to participate in WIC. For example, a family of two in Michigan must earn below approximately \$37,000 per year to be eligible. Nearly half of Michigan's pregnant and postpartum women and young children are eligible for WIC.



Once enrolled in WIC, women and children receive numerous benefits including nutrition counseling, health monitoring, and food benefits that provide the ability to purchase specific foods that promote health among pregnant and postpartum women and children. Participants also have the option to attend classes and receive counseling focused on topics such as breastfeeding and healthy lifestyle choices. WIC clinics can also make referrals to healthcare services to ensure families have access to necessary medical care, including childhood immunizations and prenatal care.

WIC was first offered in the early 1970s in response to concern for malnutrition in mothers and young children, and since then has grown substantially. In 2022, \$5.7 billion was allocated for WIC in the federal budget. In Michigan, WIC is administered by MDHHS and implemented by local health departments and other non-profit organizations. In the 2022 fiscal year, Michigan's WIC program served 321,001 women and children who purchased over \$133 million of healthy food from authorized vendors.

Extensive research has demonstrated the effectiveness of WIC in improving outcomes for mothers and children during critical developmental stages. WIC reduces premature births and low birth weight babies, improves diet quality, and increases families' access to health care. Despite these benefits, approximately 40% of eligible individuals in Michigan do not participate in the program. Specifically, participation rates are very high during the first year of life, but fall as children age.

Feeding MI Families concluded data collection prior to April 2024, when many changes to the WIC food package were announced. Some of these changes align with the requests Feeding MI Families' parents had of the program. We look forward to seeing the positive impacts of these recent changes in years to come.

Feeding MI Families Findings: WIC

Feeding MI Families survey participants were asked: “WIC provides pregnant women, new mothers, and children under 5 benefits to buy healthy food. Has your family used WIC in the past year?” If parents responded no to this question, they were then asked “Has your family ever used WIC?”

Figure 8-1 shows that 47% of parents responded that their family has participated in WIC in the past year and another 43% previously participated, leaving only 9% of parents reporting that their family never used WIC. Differences and similarities in WIC use by location, race/ethnicity, US nativity, family disability status, and safe housing status are shown in Figure 8-1. We see many fewer disparities in WIC participation than we saw for SNAP/FAP participation, likely because WIC has a higher income eligibility cutoff than SNAP/FAP and immigration status does not affect your ability to receive WIC benefits.. In fact, only 6% of Hispanic/Latino parents participating in Feeding MI Families had never participated in WIC, compared to 24% who had never participated in SNAP/FAP.

Parents who reported that their families never participated in WIC were then asked, “What are some reasons that your family has not used WIC?” Most commonly, parents responded by saying they either believed they

were not eligible for the program or had been told they were not eligible. Many parents also reported that they did not need it, and 10% were unaware of the program.

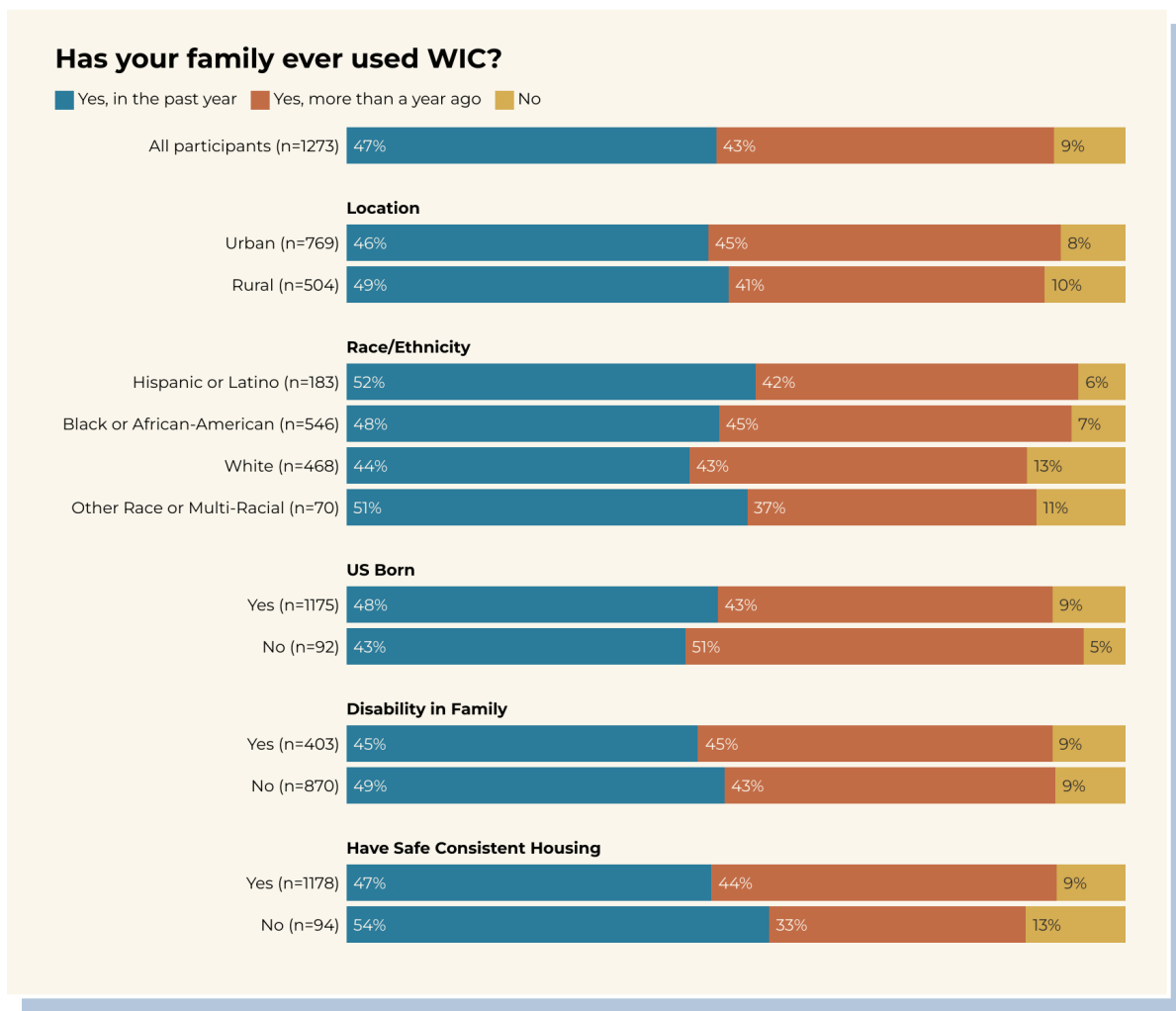
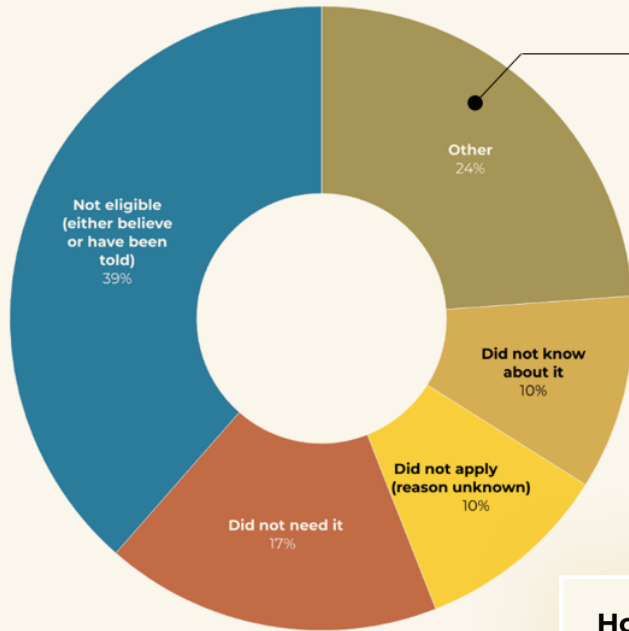


Figure 8-1

Why hasn't your family used WIC?



- 6% - Denied benefits
- 5% - Age cutoff for children
- 3% - Application process too complicated/difficult
- 3% - Benefits not available for fathers
- 2% - Appointments inconvenient
- 2% - Poor customer service
- 2% - Unsure how to apply
- 1% - Concern about immigration status
- 1% - Was not offered to me

Note: Parents may have stated multiple reasons.

Figure 8-2

“

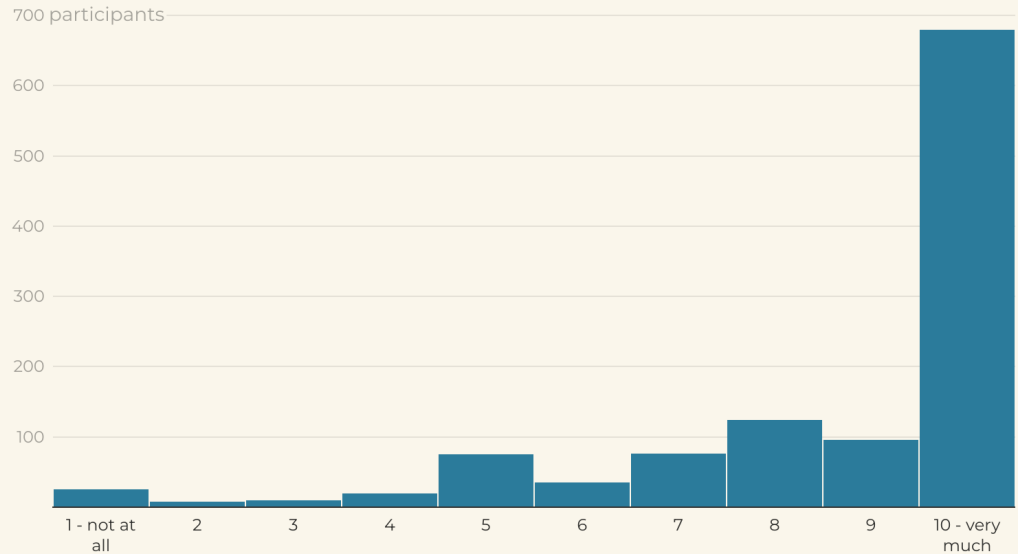
My children have celiac disease and I wasn't able to use a lot of the products WIC provided. It would be helpful if more foods were available like gluten free options.

Mom of 5, _____
northwest MI

”

How satisfied are you with WIC?

Asked of all participants who currently or previously participated in WIC



“

WIC... they understand exactly what you're going through. They've been there they've done it, they understand it, and they're not looking down on you.

Mom of 3, Battle Creek _____

”

Parents who reported currently or ever participating in WIC were asked, “On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with WIC?” The range of parent responses are shown in figure 8-3 and are broken down by sociodemographic groups in figure 8-4. Across all of the food assistance programs that we asked parents about, WIC had the highest satisfaction rating overall and across all sociodemographic groups.

When asked how WIC could be improved, parents’ most common response was that they wanted more WIC-eligible food options, and similarly, expanded package size options of WIC-eligible foods. These requests were not only driven by a desire to be able to purchase different types of food, but also because parents frequently couldn’t find the specific WIC-eligible options in the store due to supply chain issues, package size changes, or the eligible options not being available. These situations led to parents being unable to fully redeem their benefits. The second most common response was that the benefits be increased and modified such as allowing them to roll over between months, to allow more flexible use. Many parents also described frustration with the WIC shopping experience, noting it was common for WIC-eligible items to ring up incorrectly at checkout. Several parents shared times when they were held up when trying to purchase food with their WIC benefits, angering people in line behind them.

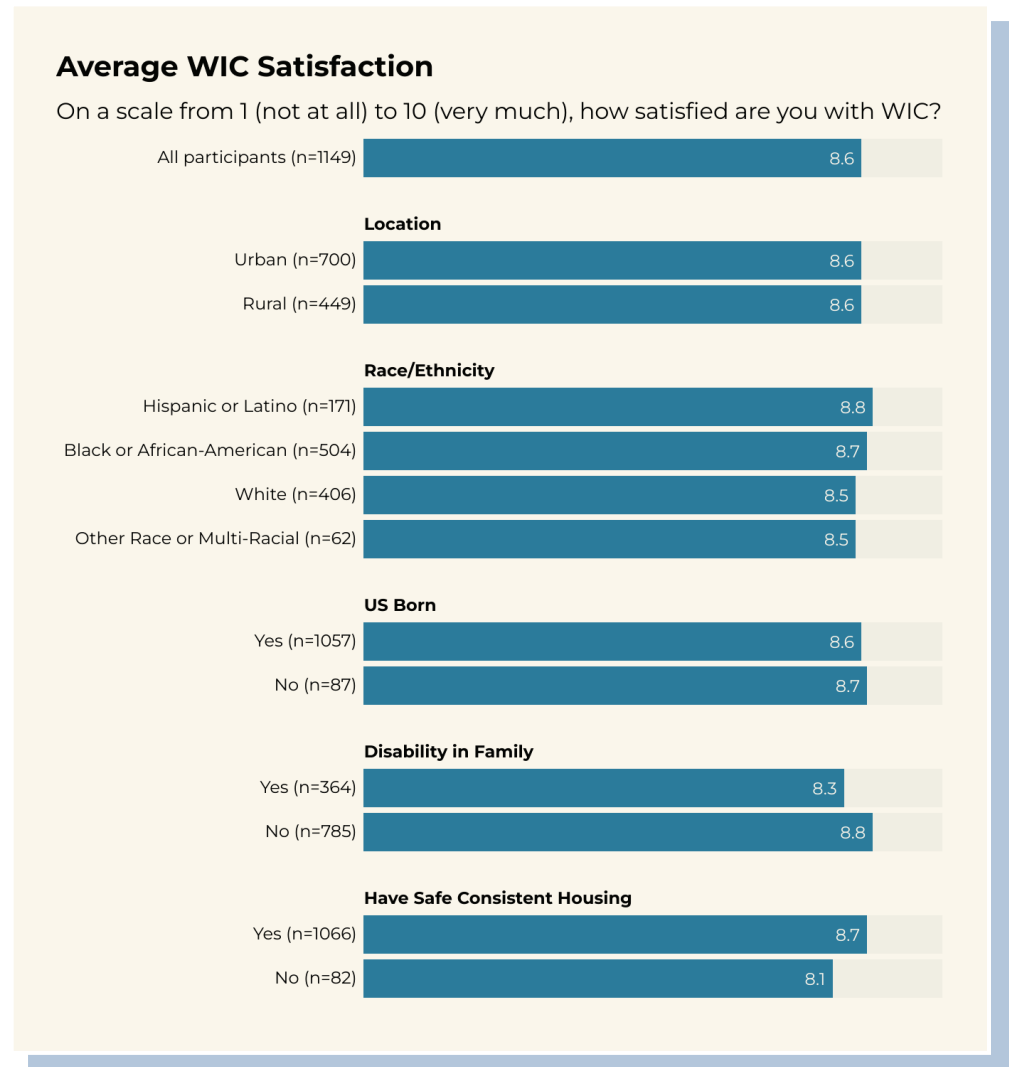


Figure 8-4


| Participants' Answers to "How can WIC be improved?" | # OF RESPONSES | QUOTES |
|--|----------------|--|
| Increase food options (food types, brands) | 282 |  |
| Increase benefits including allowing benefits to roll over across months | 102 | "Unused benefits should roll over because sometimes, like during winter, people can't get out as often." |
| Raise age cut off for children | 72 | "Not cutting families off once the child reaches 5 years of age." |
| Improve the shopping experience | 69 | "When I'm at the store, I choose foods that are labeled WIC, but when I swipe my WIC card, they are not qualified. The part of the process is very unclear and often causes me issues at the register." |
| More formula and formula options | 55 | "More variety better choices for formula. Not so particular about sizes, etc" |
| Better allowances for cultural and dietary differences | 41 | <p>"My children have celiac disease and I wasn't able to use a lot of the products WIC provided. It would be helpful if more foods were available like gluten free options."</p> <p>"Better food options, more ethnic foods available through WIC."</p> |
| Improve customer service at WIC office | 39 | "Could have been more organized and professional too, the process to get your funds and waiting and classes you have to go through to get funds is a lot to deal with." |
| Expand sizes of products eligible for purchase | 30 | "Not be so selective on the brand or size container because small towns often don't carry that exact product so we can't always use all of our benefits." |
| Clarify the process to activate and use benefits | 21 | "Making it simpler for individuals that use it for the first time." |
| Make educational materials more accessible | 20 | "Give a notice in advance about their educational class online. 1-2 days isn't enough when you have a toddler who wants constant attention." |
| Continue online appointments and opportunities | 11 | "More modern ways to connect with clients through the app and phone calls. Sometimes it's hard to travel and afford gas to appts." |
| Make WIC use available for online purchases and delivery | 11 | "It would be nice if I could use WIC for my online pick ups the same way I can use EBT or a debit card. When I get an online pick up I still have to go into the store to get the things that I can get using my WIC card. It would be nice to just be able to get it all at the same time so that I don't have to go into the store." |
| Expand eligibility | 6 | "I wish more families were eligible. We only qualify because of Medicaid, which we will be losing." |
| Clarify eligibility for fathers of eligible children | 2 | "They can improve by giving WIC to single fathers too." |
| Reduce the stigma of needing and using WIC | 2 | "It's extremely dehumanizing to have to peruse the list of brands so extensively when I'm already exhausted and overworked and I just want to get food and go home." |

Table 8-1

Top Recommendations for WIC Improvement



“Lot of times the WIC items are not available or sold out. Because of this, sometimes the benefits expire without ever being purchased. There should be more brands available to choose from to help prevent this.”

Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security

1. Incorrect labeling, lack of stock, and errors at checkout make redeeming benefits difficult and stressful for parents. Improving the WIC shopping experience by improving staff training, store signage, and point-of-sale devices would decrease the stigma of using WIC.
2. Parents would love to have the ability to use WIC to pay for eligible foods purchased online. Although this does not remove all barriers to redeeming benefits and many parents will still prefer shopping in-person, families will be more likely to stay enrolled in WIC as their children move out of infancy if they could shop online when needed.

Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families

1. Many parents are aware of WIC and most eligible families participated in WIC when their children were infants. Increasing programmatic flexibilities including expanding food package options and allowing benefits to roll over between months would make the program more useful to parents of older children.

2. Parents want more variety in which formulas are eligible for purchase with WIC. This is particularly important for families shopping at small, local stores that are often out of stock of specific formula brands and sizes.
3. Attending appointments in person is difficult for some families, especially as they have more children and they get older. Parents appreciated COVID-era flexibilities including the ability to complete education online, and would like these options to become permanent.

Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

1. Parents see WIC as a critical program for providing their families with fresh produce. Overall, they are extremely grateful for the benefits.
2. Expanding the food types, brands, and allowable package sizes of WIC-eligible foods would ensure that families could more fully redeem their benefits.





“ Covid was a big wake up call that showed us how quickly food insecurity can creep up on otherwise secure families. So many of us are just one or two strokes of bad luck away from homelessness and hunger. ————— Mom of 3, Grand Rapids ”

Family Profile:

MEET THE WALKER FAMILY

For Asia Walker, a 2003 New Year's resolution cemented her resolve. Walker said she was no longer willing to "go with the flow, just taking what was offered to me. I craved ambition, and I thought, 'You have a voice, speak.'" Even a 2006 Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis did not derail her. Asia is tenacious with a smile and energy that belie her disability. "It changes everything, not just physically but mentally, too," Walker added. Still, as a single parent of four children, she knows it's her job to advocate for them. "If you want things to be different, you must be willing to do things differently. Be vocal. Speak up for your children. Have a voice for them. Time is over for being shy, saying we'll take whatever. My opinion matters. If I have a good idea or want to see change, I have to vocalize it," Walker said.

Things don't have to stay the same because they've always been done a certain way. Asia recounts visiting a cousin in Ohio who is also low income and being at the grocery store. When it came time to pay, she pulled out an ordinary-looking debit card. Asia asked, "You're no longer getting food assistance?" The cousin said the card was her food assistance. Asia marveled that it wasn't like the familiar orange EBT card she had in Michigan. "Just changing the card would empower people. I am definitely grateful for it, but it humbles you to use the orange card," said Walker. She acknowledges that it is okay to need help, but embarrassment makes people hesitate to ask for it.

Three years ago, Asia decided to move from her beloved Detroit to Dearborn Heights. Just a few miles made a vast difference in her family's quality of life. Despite qualifying for no-cost lunch and



breakfast at their Detroit schools, the kids would instead cobble together a meal at home. The kids proclaimed that the food was amazing at their new schools. At the same time, Asia was thrilled that they can benefit from the wholesome, no-cost meals that stretch her benefits further at home. "Where you live makes a difference. The move undoubtedly was a positive change; the schools alone were worth it, and the community has been so welcoming," said Walker. Dearborn Heights is a predominately Muslim community. Asia was initially concerned that her neighbors may not welcome her family, "but they were so accepting and receiving of us, knocking on my door with gifts, and I was like, you don't know me!"

There had been a time when Asia and her kids were at a shelter. "It humbles you to stay in remembrance; just because you're no longer there doesn't mean other families aren't dealing with that. It helps you be sensitive and understanding and not so far removed that you don't have a heart." She hopes to teach her kids how to make good choices but also instill in them that "life happens. Sometimes, things are out of your control. Let's not need assistance so we can help others, but if you do need help, do not be too proud to ask, and never look down on others."



Michigan Families' Experiences with the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) Benefit

P-EBT Summary

The Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program was designed to provide cash assistance for food to students who lost access to school meals due to schools closing or moving online during the pandemic. Congress enacted the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which authorized the USDA to allocate funds to state agencies to provide eligible families benefits for the value of lost school meals. In Michigan, MDHHS partnered with MDE to implement the program, providing benefits to over 900,000 students in 2021-2022. Research on the program demonstrates that it contributes to improvements in Michigan families' food security status and helps families purchase healthier foods than they would have otherwise.

Children who would have received free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program due to low household income or attending a school that provided free school meals to all students were eligible to receive P-EBT benefits. Schools also had to be closed or operating with reduced hours for at least 5 consecutive days for children to receive benefits. In Michigan, children attending some preschool programs that provided free meals, such as Head Start, were also enrolled in P-EBT. Each child meeting the criteria received benefits on their existing Bridge Card or through a newly issued EBT card. P-EBT benefits were similar to SNAP/FAP benefits and could be used at authorized retailers when purchasing eligible foods. States either issued the benefits in a lump sum or through multiple smaller payments throughout the year.

Families did not individually apply to receive benefits. Instead, the state agencies worked with school districts to obtain the names and addresses of eligible children. This process and the initial need to rapidly distribute benefits prevented some eligible children from receiving all their benefits. Initially, P-EBT funds were provided to families through the end of the 2019-2020 school year, but fortunately, the program was extended into subsequent



school years. Michigan also applied for federal support to extend P-EBT into summer. Therefore, many families received benefits in summer 2021, 2022, and 2023, and will again in summer 2024, with the program rebranded as Summer EBT. P-EBT provides a great example of creativity and flexibility in ensuring children have sufficient access to food during periods when they're not attending school.

Feeding MI Families Findings: P-EBT

Feeding MI Families survey participants were asked: “P-EBT is a program that provides families money on an EBT/Bridge Card during the summer and when schools are closed because of COVID-19. Has your family ever used P-EBT?”

75% of parents responded that they have used P-EBT and participation was fairly similar across families of varying urbanicity, race/ethnicity, US nativity, and disability status (see Figure 9-1). However, only 61% of families without safe, consistent housing participated in P-EBT compared to 76% of families with safe, consistent housing. This difference may arise from the fact that schools provided MDE student-level information in order to get families their EBT cards. Families with inconsistent housing may have had an outdated address on file and thus never received their benefits.

Parents who reported using P-EBT were then asked, “Using a scale of 1 to 10, 1-not at all satisfied to 10-very satisfied, how satisfied are you with the P-EBT program?” The range of parents responses are shown in figure 9-2 and are broken down by different sociodemographic groups in figure 9-3.

When asked how P-EBT could be improved, parents’ responses most commonly fell into one of 3 themes: increase the amount of benefits provided, improve the consistency of the program, and expand the scope of the

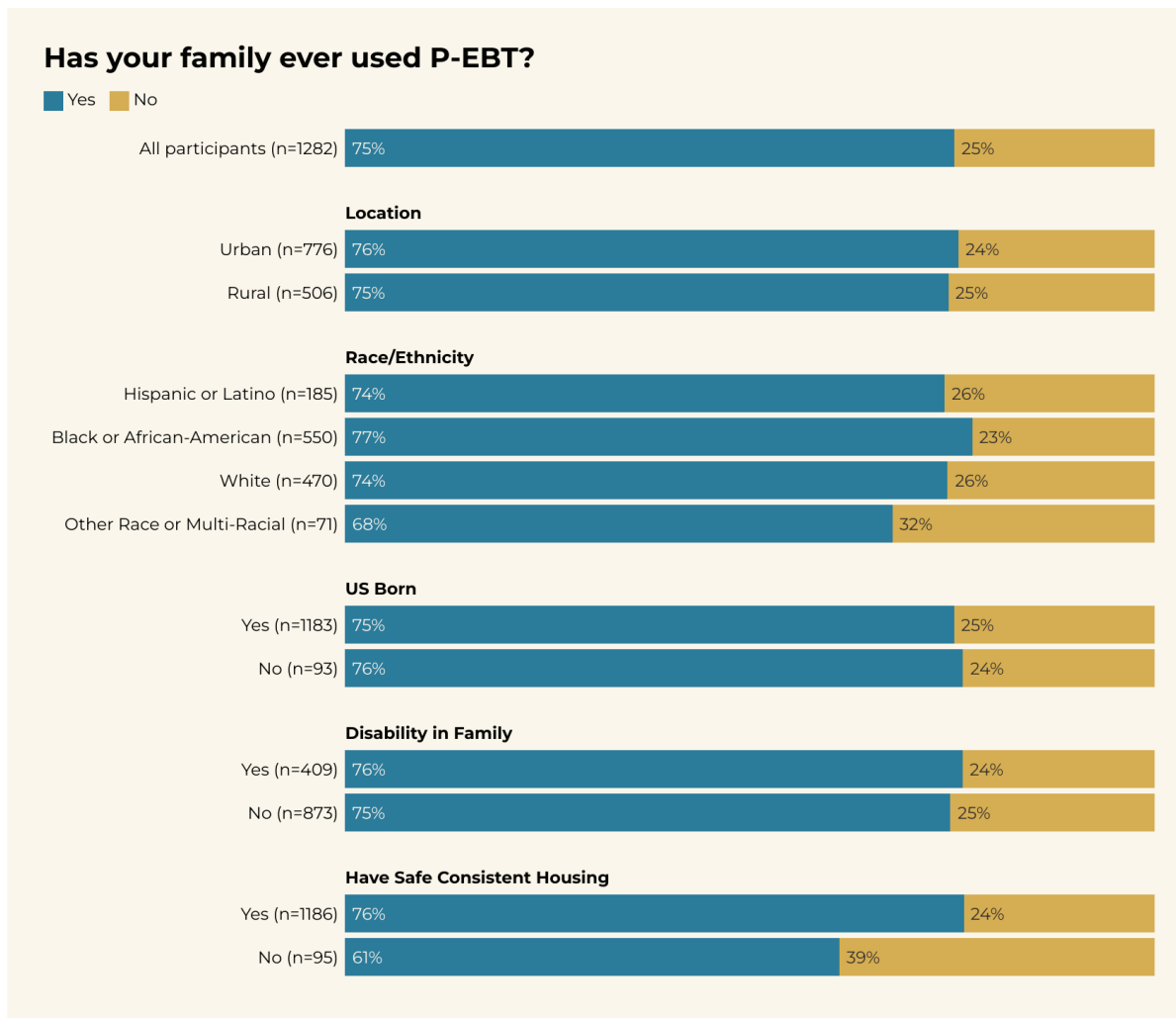


Figure 9-1

“ I think it would be amazing to not ever have to worry about where your next meal is coming from or just worrying about like buying your fresh fruits and vegetables and creating healthier meals.

————— Mom of 3, eastern MI

”

How satisfied are you with P-EBT?

Asked of all participants who currently or previously participated in P-EBT

500 participants

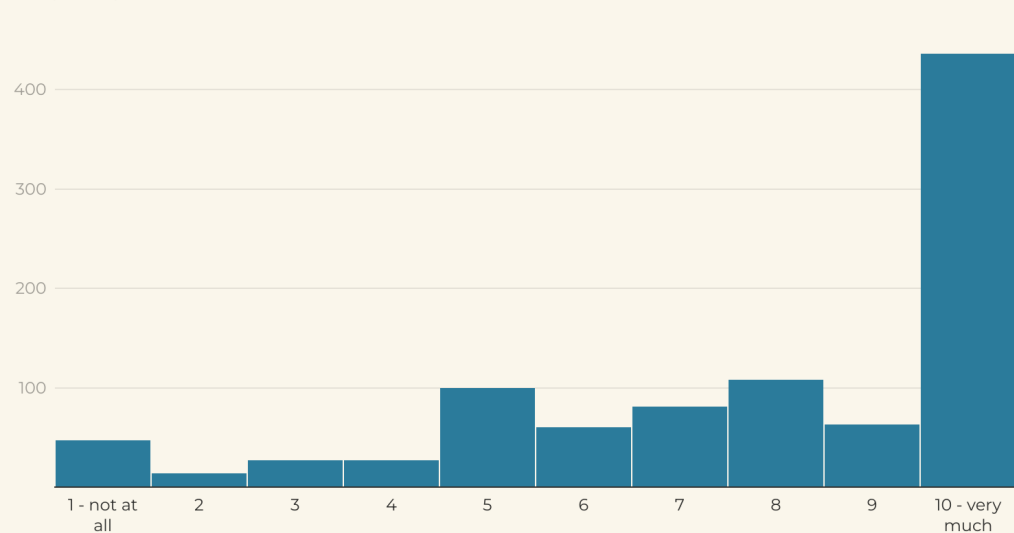


Figure 9-2

program to include other periods, including continuing beyond the pandemic. With regard to consistency, many parents reported frustration with the communication around P-EBT including who was eligible, when the benefits would arrive, and how many benefits would be provided. Parents also frequently felt that there were mistakes in how the benefits were awarded and distributed, and communication with the school and the state was difficult when trying to resolve errors. Importantly, we found that many parents had difficulty distinguishing between P-EBT and SNAP/FAP, likely because the benefits



were loaded onto the same card for many families. This confusion between the two programs likely contributed to frustration about the timing and mechanisms of receiving benefits, as well as who to contact to resolve problems.

Average P-EBT Satisfaction

On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with P-EBT?

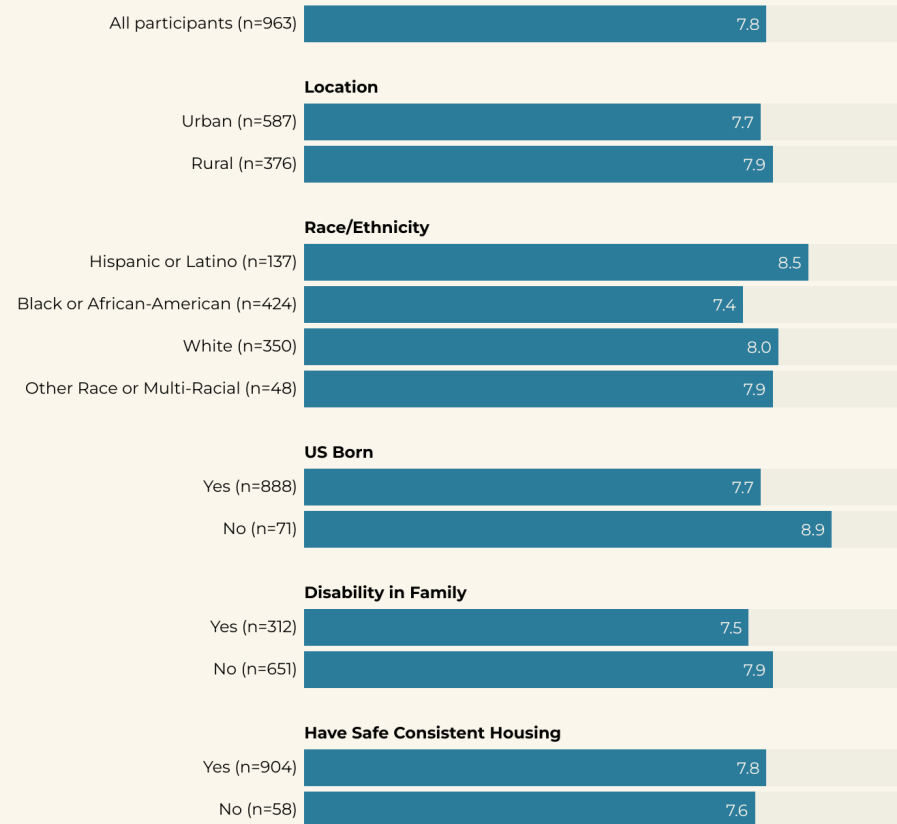


Figure 9-3

| Participants' Answers to "How Can P-EBT Be Improved?" | # OF RESPONSES | QUOTES |
|--|----------------|--|
| Increase amount of benefits provided | 184 | |
| Improve the consistency of benefits | 183 | "An exact date of deposit would help the parent budget. It's hard to count on something that might help you out, and then sit and wait and watch the date come and go with no deposit or help!" |
| Expand the scope of the program to include other periods | 178 | "Give it to families at the beginning of summer when the kids are home instead of at the end when kids go back, and would be nice to have a little bit more especially with cost of food going up." |
| Expand eligibility criteria | 147 | "Give to the families that are home school children." |
| Improve communication between parents, schools, and the state | 89 | "Better communication as to when and how much was coming." |
| Reduce mistakes in identifying eligible children and distributing benefits | 73 | "I'm just confused on who qualifies. Only some of my kids have gotten one. Some have never been to public school but still got one. Others have never gotten one but have been to school." |
| Clarify the process to activate and use benefits | 26 | "Clear instructions how to activate & where to use card & add more money." |
| Consolidate the number of EBT cards | 20 | "The benefits could be loaded to a family card versus separate cards." |
| Make it easier to check your balance | 20 | "Easier balance access." |
| Allow benefits to be used for other items | 7 | "Items such as toiletries and laundry detergent could be eligible." |
| Limit "junk"/unhealthy foods | 6 | "It should be aligned closer to WIC where only a small amount of funds can be used for grocery items and a certain amount of funds for milk, cheese, grain, eggs, and fruit. No junk food or pop should be bought with EBT funds." |
| Allow benefits to qualify for Double Up Food bucks | 2 | "More funding or Dbl [Double Up] food bucks." |
| Make a more discrete card design | 1 | "Discrete card design." |

"Distribution of funds and card in timely manner, increased amount due to increased food cost and better communication and follow through between school and MDE."



Table 9-1

Top Recommendations for P-EBT Improvement

Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security

1. As with SNAP/FAP, parents requested that EBT cards have a discreet design to reduce negative comments from other grocery shoppers or retail staff.



Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families

1. With Summer EBT becoming established in Michigan, it is essential that all families are made aware of program eligibility and the timing and amount of benefits. Lack of clarity and inconsistent awards made food budgeting difficult for families.
2. Wherever possible, minimize the logistic barriers to activating and using the Summer EBT card. Parents struggled with needing to get online and using a password to activate the card.

Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

1. Explore the possibility of connecting Summer EBT with Double Up Food Bucks to further stretch families' benefits and increase children's access to local, fresh produce.





Michigan Families' Experiences with School Food Distribution during COVID-19

COVID-19 School Food Distribution Summary



During non-pandemic times, the federal government's National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide school-aged children with free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch at school. For many food-insecure families, these meals are a lifeline that stretches food resources. However, with long-term and then intermittent unpredictable school closures during COVID-19, many families lost access to these meals.

Fortunately, Congress quickly passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which allowed schools to distribute food to students and their families when schools were not meeting in person. With technical support from MDE, districts across the state used this flexibility to find creative ways to get food to families. Curbside pick-up, drive-through pick-up, drop-off locations, walk-up distribution sites, and delivery to students' homes were just some of the ways that schools tried to reach families in need. Through these methods, schools provided families with children of all ages bulk items to make meals at home, grab-and-go meals, snack packs, and/or hot foods.

Over 2,000 school food distribution sites were established across Michigan with the Detroit Public Schools alone serving almost 50,000 students from 106 schools over the pandemic. Fortunately, while the days of school closures due to COVID-19 seem to be over, there are many lessons to be learned from the pandemic-era food distribution efforts. Families' perceptions of the various aspects of food distribution are important and can be used to improve other food assistance efforts.

Feeding MI Families Findings: COVID-19 School Food Distribution

Feeding MI Families asked parents, “During COVID-19, many schools distributed free food to families. Families either needed to pick up this food or it was delivered. Did your family get free food from school during COVID-19?”

As seen in Figure 10-1, 51% of parents in Feeding MI Families reported yes, with some differences in use by family location and across families of varying race/ethnicity. In particular, rural families, Hispanic/Latino families, White families, and families where the parent was born outside the US were slightly more likely to receive free food from school during COVID-19.

Parents who reported that their families did not participate in these school food distribution programs were then asked, “What are some reasons that your family did not get free food from school during COVID-19?”

As seen in Figure 10-2, parents most commonly reported that they did not participate in school food distribution programs because their children were not enrolled in school, were home-schooled, or were not school-aged during COVID-19. This is especially notable given that school districts served children of all ages and were often flexible about serving

children not enrolled in their district. Many parents also reported that they were not aware of distribution efforts in their community or did not have enough details about how

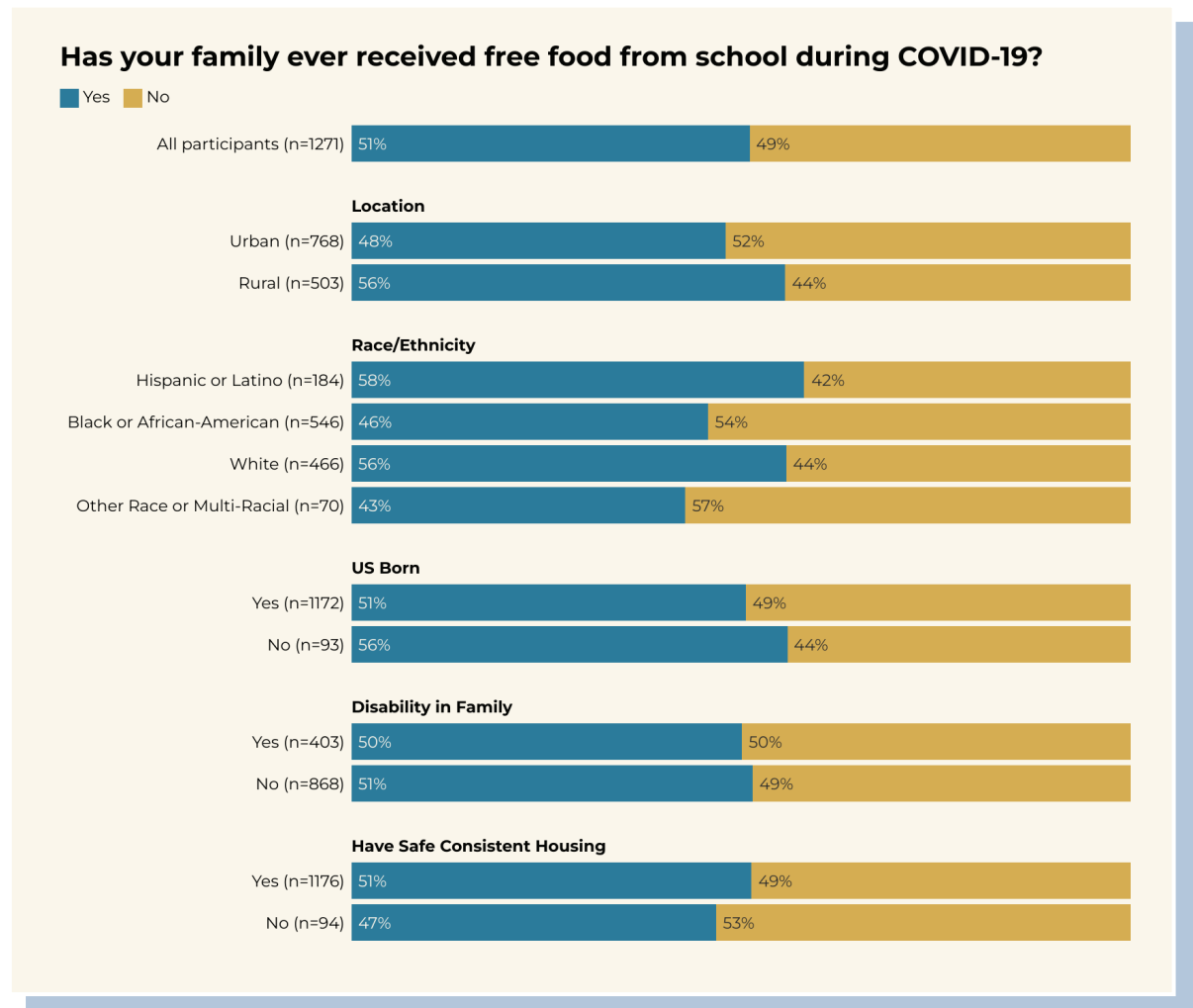
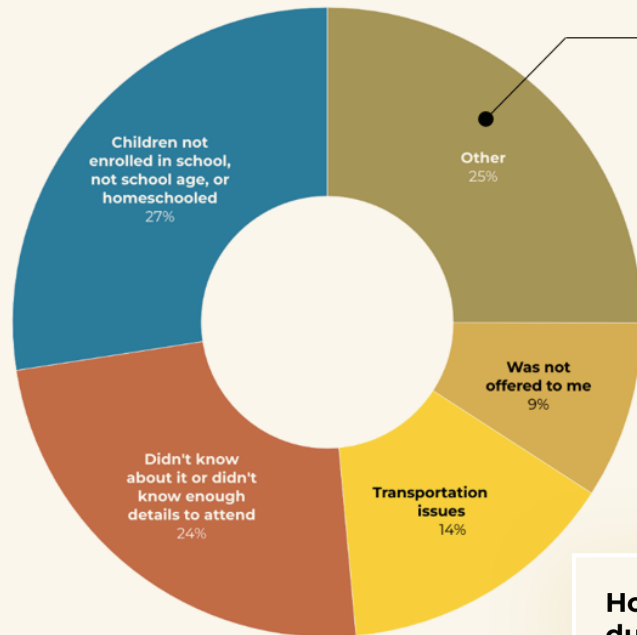


Figure 10-1

Why didn't your family receive free food from school during COVID-19?



- 5% - Used other services/benefits and/or didn't need it
- 5% - Not available to me
- 4% - Pick-up times didn't work
- 3% - Safety concerns due to COVID
- 2% - Food offered didn't meet family's needs
- 2% - Wanted those who needed it more to take advantage
- 2% - No school in the area
- 1% - School ran out of food
- 1% - No reason
- 1% - Health issues limited me

Note: Parents may have stated multiple reasons.

Figure 10-2

“

Food from school during COVID-19 just helped out. Everybody was friendly, there was no judgment there whatsoever, and I just felt like it brought the community together.

————— Mom of 2,
northwest MI

”

How satisfied were you with school free food distribution programs during COVID-19?

Asked of all participants who participated in school free food distribution programs during COVID-19

400 participants

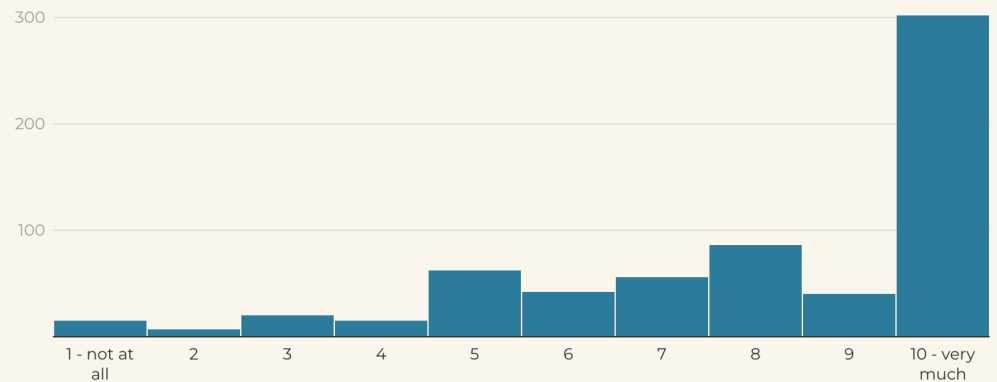


Figure 10-3



to participate to feel comfortable doing so. Another 14% of parents also shared that transportation issues limited their ability to access school food distribution sites.

Parents who reported participating in school food distribution programs were asked, “On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much,

how satisfied were you with schools free food distribution programs during COVID-19?” The range of parents’ responses are shown in Figure 10-3 and are broken down across different sociodemographic groups in Figure 10-4.

When asked how school food distribution programs could be improved, responses were quite similar to those that we heard about improving the charitable food system. Parents wanted a greater quantity and variety of food, including more food of higher nutritional quality such as fruits and vegetables. Parents also frequently shared that the foods distributed were highly processed and did not meet their expectations for healthy, safe food to feed their children. Additionally, parents said they would like to see programs have greater flexibility in food distribution, particularly the times and locations of distribution sites, as well as clearer communication about these programs.

Average Satisfaction with School Free Food Distribution During COVID-19

On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with school free food distribution during COVID-19?

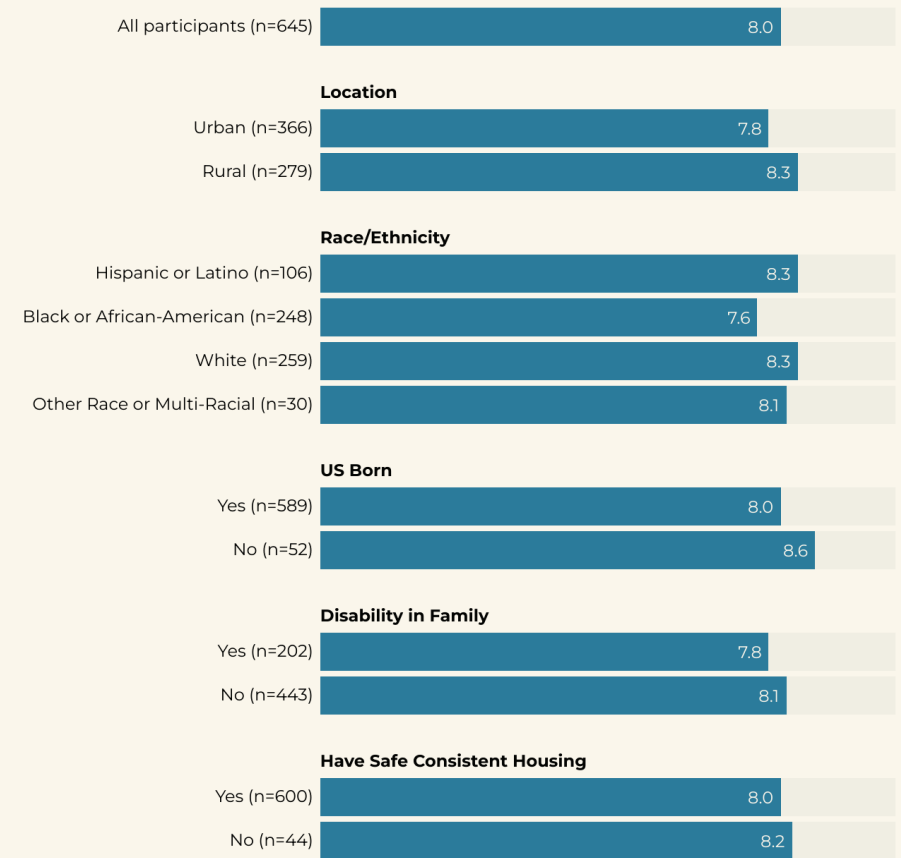


Figure 10-4

Participants' Answers to "How Can School Food Distribution Programs Be Improved?"


| | # OF RESPONSES | QUOTES |
|---|----------------|--|
| Increase quantity and variety of food offered | 134 |  |
| Improve food quality/safety | 113 | "Better food options, food choices, more healthier and or just not so processed?" |
| Greater flexibility | 75 | "The pick up times didn't always work out with parents' schedules." |
| Better communication about hours | 47 | "By sending home information with students about when and where." |
| Improve consistency | 36 | "More consistent and desirable choices for kids." |
| Continue food distribution | 27 | "Continue it!!! It was very helpful!!! I was very sorry to see it stop. Even with the pandemic over people still struggle to put food on the table. This was very helpful. Always had fresh fruit/vegetables." |
| Address transportation barriers/need a delivery option | 20 | "Rural distribution, it cost me more to drive to get the food then the food would have cost." |
| Increase number of locations | 20 | "More availability of pickup times and locations." |
| Provide appropriate food for allergies, medical needs, etc. | 12 | "Make meals able to be selective for picky eaters or dietary restricted children." |
| Expand range of eligible children | 10 | "My son is homeschooled and wasn't allotted those same benefits, also day care children either." |
| Improve packaging | 6 | "I would have liked to see better packaging, it was a lot of plastic waste." |
| Reduce stigma | 3 | "I worry about a stigma being attached to a kid by the food distribution. So hoping that the teachers do it with respect and dignity." |
| Offer gift cards | 2 | "Maybe offer weekly gift cards for the cold items, that way they won't go bad and you could get them fresh." |

Table 10-1

"Include more fruits and veggies."



Top Recommendations for School Food Distribution Improvement

Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security

1. School food distribution programs always need to be aware of the potential for stigma against children perceived to be low-income or food insecure.

Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families

1. Many parents were unsure of their eligibility to receive food from school and did not feel they understood the process well enough to feel comfortable participating in the distribution program. Families would benefit from widespread, simple communications about food programs through multiple channels.

2. Busy families benefit from flexibility in food distribution including variety in the days and hours that programs operate.

Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

1. Whenever possible, consider ways to minimize the distribution of highly processed foods and prioritize fresh food, including produce.
2. Families with children with specific dietary needs struggle to find safe free or low-cost foods. Food distribution programs should, if possible, provide families access to foods that are safe for children with common food allergies or other medical dietary needs.



“ The policies are being made by the higher ups, the community may not have as much involvement as needed and its just they assess what they think we need, and then they just kind of go from there. And so these policies end up in place. These criteria end up in place. But you know, it’s not actually working. —————

Mom of 4,
Grand Rapids

”



Family Profile:

MEET THE MASON FAMILY



A home, two cars, two incomes, and five healthy, active children are, by any definition, the American Dream. But, for the Mason family, it's impossible to make ends meet most weeks, and full bellies are a rarity. Gladstone, Michigan, where the family calls home, is in the Upper Peninsula. This rural community has relied on the local paper mill for decades for jobs. It is where Jeremy Mason works 12-hour swing shifts to support his family. Tosha is employed at the local WIC office, providing support services to mothers and their children. The irony is not lost on her, "We counsel families on how to provide nutritious meals for their children, and yet I cannot do that for my own," notes Tosha. While their income keeps them from qualifying for food assistance, it does not afford them enough to put well-balanced meals on the table; tonight's dinner was simple cheese quesadillas and orange slices.

Tosha hesitates to admit that COVID-19 provided much-needed relief for her family. The added food and child healthcare benefits offered some breathing room, but the healthcare assistance for the children provided the most significant relief. They are grateful that Jeremy's job offers healthcare benefits. Still, despite the family being relatively healthy, co-pays and premiums cost them nearly \$10,000 in 2023. It is the largest line item in their meticulously managed budget. Combined with rising food costs—they could eat well on \$150 a week just a few years ago but now find that \$250 a week barely buys necessities; they often go hungry, and the COVID support has mostly been discontinued. Her youngest

child still qualifies for WIC benefits, providing the family with cheese and tortillas for dinner.

It does not help that the prices are higher in their rural community, where shopping options are limited. On a recent trip to the grocery store, Tosha had hoped to buy some fresh fruit, but a 1-pound container of conventionally-grown strawberries was \$9. In metro Detroit, those same berries were \$3.99. Thankfully, her school-age children get free breakfast and lunch, where they take advantage of the fresh fruits and vegetables offered at school. It eases her guilt about not always being able to have those things on the table at home.

Tosha wishes more people understood that food and healthcare benefits have very definitive qualifications, but life is full of gray areas. "The moment you make enough money that you no longer qualify for food benefits, you also do not qualify for healthcare and several other services," says Mason. Unfortunately, income alone does not indicate your ability to survive without support. House payments, utilities, and insurance costs all play a role in determining how much they have left for groceries. "I wish that the programs were on more of a sliding scale," Tosha adds. When asked if she ever uses local food pantries, she says, "No, those are for people in really desperate situations and have nowhere else to go."



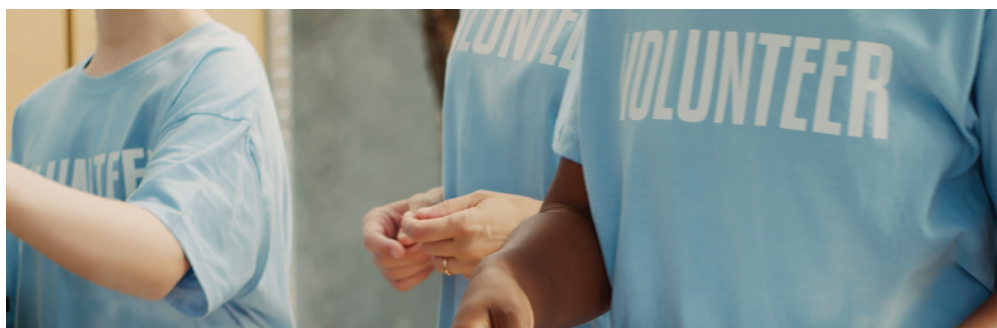
Michigan Families' Experiences with the Charitable Food System

Charitable Food System Summary

The charitable food system, also referred to as the emergency food system, includes organizations large and small that provide free or low-cost foods to families in need. The system includes food banks, which are regional organizations that source, warehouse, and distribute food, and smaller, local organizations that provide food directly to individuals and families. These smaller, local organizations may operate food pantries, where people can obtain groceries at no cost, and/or congregate meal sites (e.g., soup kitchens), which provide prepared meals at no cost. In 2022, 49 million Americans accessed food through the charitable food system.

The food distributed through the charitable food system comes from a number of sources. Most food is donated by people, businesses, and farmers. In particular, the food provided by farmers helps ensure that families in need have access to fresh produce and helps farmers reduce food waste. Organizations can also purchase food using the monetary donations that they receive. This is an efficient way to ensure that they have sufficient amounts of desired, culturally appropriate foods for their communities. Finally, food banks can access commodity food (e.g., cereals, beans, proteins, dairy, and cheese) to distribute to local organizations through The Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, both administered by the federal government.

As the charitable food system is not a formal network and resources often pop up as needed and vary considerably in size and scope, it is difficult to estimate how many organizations are providing free food and meals to Michiganders. We do know, however, that during the



“ I love the friendliness [of the food pantry], that no one made you feel less than. I just felt very welcome. There were many children under five, but then when you see a big, tall 16-year-old young man come in and then you still getting smiles and received, it was just very comforting. _____

Mom of 5,
Dearborn Heights



height of COVID-19, from March of 2020 through February of 2021, 4,653 hunger-relief agencies throughout the state distributed almost 230,000,000 pounds of food to families. Additionally, we know that charitable food resources in Michigan are much more concentrated in our urban and suburban areas, and are more difficult to access in our rural regions. In many of these rural communities, families rely on mobile food pantries that partner with local organizations to bring free food and groceries to the area.

Feeding MI Families Findings: Charitable Food System

To understand Michigan families' experiences engaging with the charitable food system, we asked parents the following question: "There are many community organizations that provide families free food or hot meals including food pantries, churches, and YMCAs. Has your family ever gotten free food or hot meals from places like these?"

63% of parents responded yes, they have received free food or hot meals from organizations like these, with differences and similarities by location, race/ethnicity, US nativity, family disability status, and safe housing status shown in Figure 11-1.

Parents who reported that their families have never received free food or hot meals from community organizations were then asked, "What are some reasons that your family has not gotten free food or hot meals from community organizations such as food pantries, churches, and YMCAs?"

Most commonly, parents responded with comments that demonstrated that they did not know where to go. Transportation issues and inconvenient location/timing of pantries were other common comments. Although not the most common

response, some parents felt that they did not want to use these resources because they felt they should be saved for

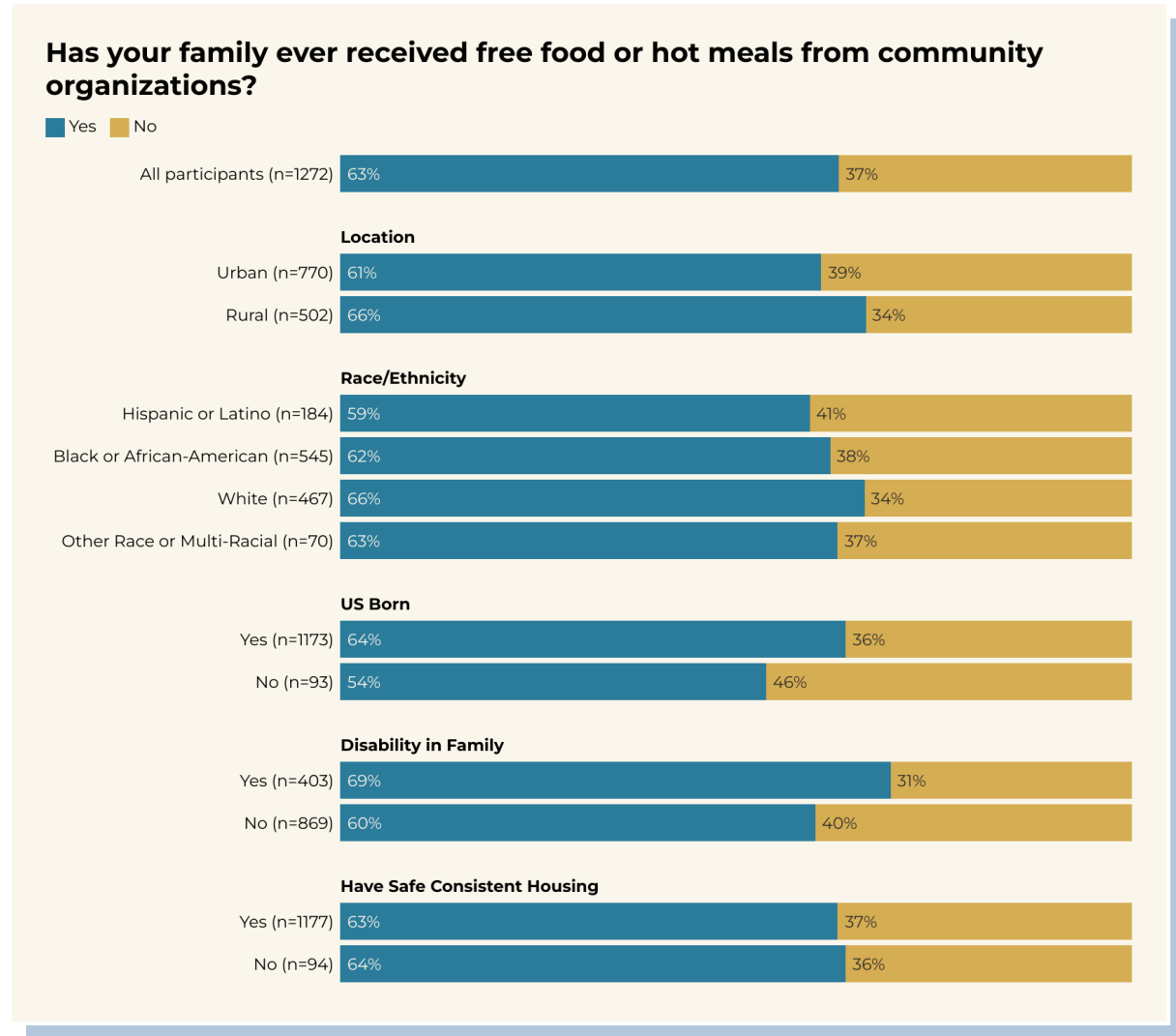
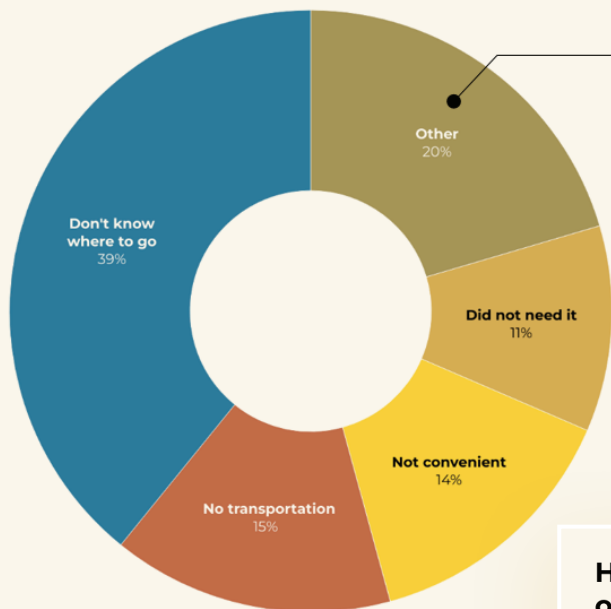


Figure 11-1

Why hasn't your family received free food or hot meals from community organizations?



- 4% - Shame, embarrassment, judgement, etc.
- 4% - Wanted those who needed it more to take advantage
- 3% - Have not tried
- 3% - Not available in my community
- 2% - Poor food quality or quantity
- 2% - Don't meet eligibility criteria, including income limits
- 1% - Health problems limit me
- 1% - Food pantries ask for too much information to participate
- 1% - Can't keep/store food

Note: Parents may have stated multiple reasons.

Figure 11-2

How satisfied are you with free food or hot meals from community organizations?

Asked of all participants who currently or previously received free food or hot meals from community organizations

400 participants

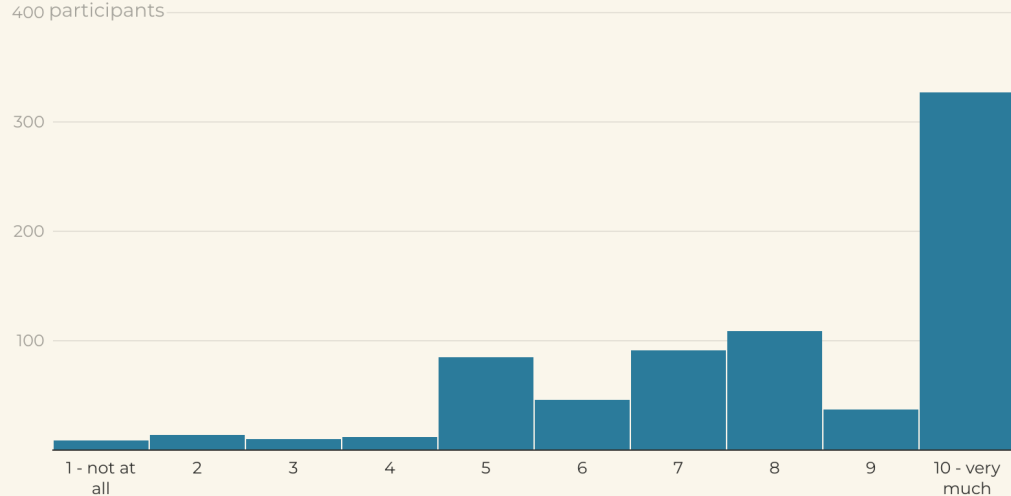


Figure 11-3

others who had more need than them. Figure 11-2 provides more details on parents' responses.

Parents who reported that their families had received free food or hot meals from community organizations were instead asked, "On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with food or hot meals from community organizations?" The range of parent responses are shown in Figure 11-3 and are broken down by different sociodemographic groups in Figure 11-4. In particular, families identifying as multi-racial and/or not Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, or White reported the lowest satisfaction with free food/hot meal programs, as did those with a family member with a disability and families without safe, consistent housing.

When asked how free food or hot meals from community organizations could be improved, parents most commonly responded that they would like to see increased food quality and safety. Parents frequently commented that community organizations distributed food approaching or past its expiration date and fresh food that had spoiled. While many foods are still edible past their "best by" dates, parents often did not feel safe serving these foods and felt devalued by being given these foods. Parents also desired an increase in the quantity and varieties of food offered. However, many parents also shared that they were not able to store or use the large quantities of foods distributed by some programs, leading to sadness and shame that food went to waste. For this reason, offering families a choice of what food and how much food to take is critical.

Average Satisfaction with Free Food or Hot Meals from Community Organizations

On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much), how satisfied are you with free food or hot meals from community organizations?

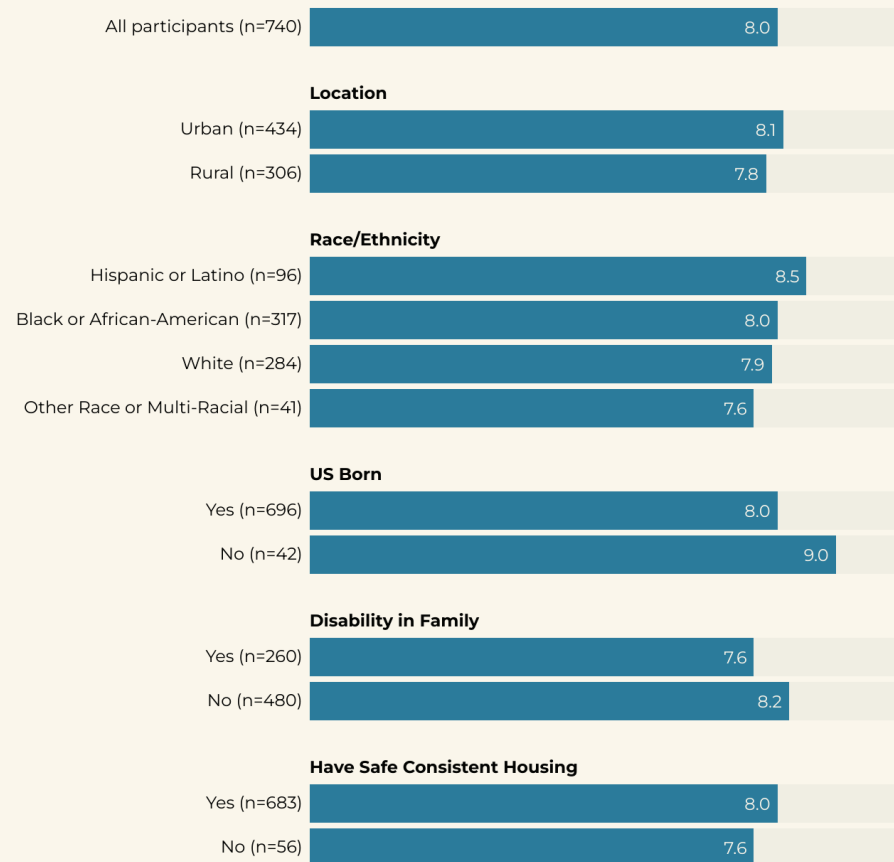


Figure 11-4

Participants' Answers to "How Can Free Food or Hot Meals From Community Organizations Be Improved?"


| | # OF RESPONSES | QUOTES |
|---|----------------|--|
| Improve food quality and safety | 130 |  |
| Increase quantity and variety of food offered | 81 | "Better quality of food, not the same thing over and over each week." |
| Greater flexibility | 50 | "Have more openings for people who work late, or work around people's work schedules." |
| Increase numbers/locations | 44 | "More distribution dates and locations." |
| Offer more useful/preferred items | 39 | "Have more meal options put together instead of random items." |
| Increase advertising | 33 | "Making sure the word gets out more." |
| Increase frequency of distribution and allow more frequent use | 33 | "I go to the food banks and the only thing I would say about that is it would be nice if we could go more than once a month." |
| Improve pick up process | 30 | "Better organization. Volunteers shouldn't rush the people seeking assistance. Newcomers feel rushed or uncertain about how the systems work." |
| Provide transportation or delivery | 29 | "More ways to get it to others without transportation." |
| Reduce waste | 21 | "Not just filling a box and say here you go, ask the family what they will and will not use. To me they waste a lot by not allowing families to have a say in what they eat." |
| Provide appropriate foods for allergies, medical needs, etc | 13 | "My daughter has food allergies so it's hard to guarantee that the food is free of what her allergies are." |
| Disperse items more evenly so those who can't go first still get good items | 8 | "I had to line up very very early to get em, and if you get there too late you don't get nothing. Like, I had to line up at 6 in the morning and wait there til noon. and the kids get on the bus at 6, so you have to get there right after the kids get on the bus." |
| Provide more hot meals | 6 | "I think there should be more places that provide free hot meals." |
| Provide recipes or cooking classes | 5 | "Yes to include more fresh fruit and produce and less processed food and Include a recipe to make the meal." |
| Reduce stigma | 5 | "Not as many judgmental people." |
| Improve customer service | 4 | "Faster pace and friendlier people." |
| Increase eligibility criteria | 3 | "Open eligibility." |
| Increase community involvement | 1 | "More community involvement." |

Table 11-1

Top Recommendations for Charitable Food System Improvement



Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security

1. Many families feel that using a food pantry or hot food program is a last resort, they feel ashamed of having no other choice but to use them and don't want their children to be aware that they are using the charitable food system. Reducing the stigma of needing charitable food and improving the environment of food pantries/ food distribution sites should be a priority to ensure that families who need food feel comfortable accessing it.
2. Clear communication about days and hours open, ensuring generous and empathetic staff and volunteers, and allowing food choice are all strategies that parents reported made them feel more comfortable using the charitable food system.



“Just because people are having a hard time doesn't mean they don't deserve food that is not expired or rotten.”

Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families

1. Organizing foods offered to be able to make a complete meal and assisting families via providing recipes, no-cook options, etc. can greatly improve parents' experiences.
2. Many programs are open for limited hours during the traditional work week. Prioritizing flexibility of operating days and hours will increase access and reduce stress on families.
3. Many families need to be able to access charitable food more than once a week or more than once a month. Whenever possible, programs should evaluate their policies and consider whether restrictions such as these are necessary for effective operation.
4. Allowing families a choice of food types and portion sizes can increase program satisfaction and decrease food waste.

Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products

1. Many parents with family members with food allergies or other medical dietary needs found food pantries and hot food programs to be inaccessible, leading them to have to spend more of their budget on food from grocery stores. Food banks and pantries can place a higher priority on providing foods safe for individuals with allergies, gluten intolerance, diabetes, etc.
2. Offering near date, expired, or spoiled food makes many families feel less than and is perceived as a form of discrimination. Education about “best by” dates may help some families feel more comfortable using these foods, but other families will perceive these efforts as pressure to eat food that is not safe and/or has been cast off by others.



Sharing, Bartering & Gardening: Creative and Informal Methods through which Michigan Families Obtain Food

Creative and Informal Methods of Obtaining Food



While programs including SNAP, WIC, and charitable food programs provide essential support to families experiencing food insecurity, many families continue to have needs

beyond what those resources can provide. Additionally, many families choose not to use these programs due to fear or shame, and others do not qualify for these resources but still struggle with food insecurity. Overall, regardless of their eligibility for or use of food assistance, nearly all families experiencing food insecurity draw on informal networks of food support and identify methods to obtain food outside of established assistance systems.

However, compared to established assistance programs, much less is known about the informal methods through which families obtain food, the challenges of relying on informal assistance, and the impacts of informal assistance on families' food security. We do know that the first place that most people turn to for food assistance is their social circle, with family often being the first line of support. In fact, people typically turn to family and friends before accessing food banks or soup kitchens. Unsurprisingly, individuals who have a strong sense of social support and cohesion also are less likely to experience food insecurity.

The Feeding MI Families survey included two questions about parents' reliance on friends and family to obtain food and money for food. Figure 12-1 shows that 77% of parents have received food from friends, family, or social groups so they could have enough to eat. More than half of parents relied on friends, family, or social groups sometimes or often. Despite these high numbers, we cannot forget the shame and embarrassment that many families feel when they can't make ends meet. Several parents shared with us that they would never let their family or friends know that they needed help.

How often do friends, family, or social groups give your family food so you have enough to eat? (n=1265)

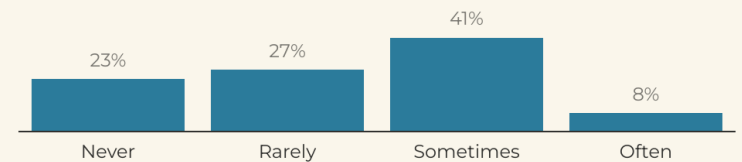


Figure 12-1

Receiving money for food from friends, family, or social groups was less common than receiving food, but still, 62% of parents reported that they had received money for food from others.

How often do friends, family, or social groups help you out with money so your family can have enough to eat? (n=1261)

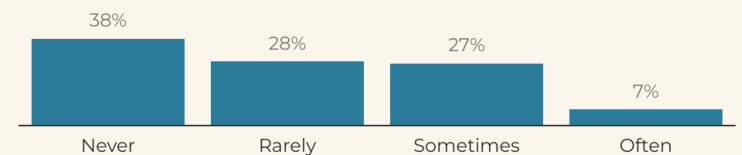


Figure 12-2

“ I wouldn’t be asking for help if I didn’t need help. ————— Mom of 1, northwest MI ”

INFORMAL METHODS THAT MICHIGAN FAMILIES USE TO OBTAIN FOOD

| Resource | # of Times Mentioned |
|---|----------------------|
| Community organizations including schools and churches | 475 |
| Neighbors, friends, and family members | 118 |
| Income from extra work and odd jobs | 58 |
| Coupons, sales, bargain shopping, and discounts | 49 |
| Gardening and farming | 25 |
| Eating less and skipping meals | 12 |
| Eating free food from work | 12 |
| Attending events where free food is provided | 11 |
| Attending programs like cooking classes that include food | 11 |
| Foraging, fishing, and hunting | 10 |
| Preservation techniques | 10 |
| Making meals last and using creative meal strategies | 8 |
| Selling belongings | 8 |
| Using funds from non-food assistance programs, like SSI | 8 |
| Redeeming cans | 6 |
| Through social media groups | 6 |
| Buying food with credit cards | 4 |
| Panhandling or stealing | 4 |
| Selling plasma or blood | 4 |
| Buying and eating expired food | 3 |
| Obtaining surplus produce from local farms | 3 |
| Bartering and trading food | 1 |
| Using payday loans | 1 |

Table 12-1

At the end of our survey, we additionally asked parents to describe any resources they use to obtain food that our questions did not already touch on. Parents’ responses to these questions provide essential insight into the creative ways that families make ends meet and ensure their children do not go without.

Summary

Many Michigan families are using every method they can access to ensure that their children have enough to eat. Sharing food and even money among friends and family is common and is an important strategy that social circles and communities use to make sure that others are not going without. Other strategies commonly used by families to make ends meet include relying on community organizations; picking up additional hours or odd jobs to earn a bit more; gardening, canning, and preserving food, budgeting and coupon clipping; and purposefully attending events with food.

Unfortunately, however, some families turn to illegal and/or potentially unhealthy or dangerous methods to obtain food when they feel they have no choice. Feeding MI Families participants reported having to steal food, consume expired food, donate blood or plasma, and rely on payday loans, which in many cases, leave families with fewer resources than before due to high-interest rates and short repayment periods.

Families should never have to use dangerous or harmful methods to ensure their children do not go hungry. The need for these strategies is a strong indicator that our current nutrition assistance safety net is insufficient, and healthy, safe, and legal resources need to be strengthened to ensure those in need can access them.



“ I think it would be amazing to not ever have to worry about where your next meal is coming from. ————— Mom of 3, eastern MI ”

Family Profile:

MEET THE RIGGS FAMILY

Deanna Riggs is exhausted. The single mother of three special needs kids has not been able to work for the better part of 18 years because she is unable to find the kind of job that affords her the flexibility to attend regular medical appointments for her children. “I’ve lost jobs because I’ve needed to take time off to take a child to the hospital for a procedure, and then my caseworker tells me, ‘You didn’t try hard enough.’ It hurts.” Recently, she had to give up the family home and move in with friends to further cut expenses and focus on putting her children first. She is not here by choice. “I’d rather have it that I am working and living on my own and my kids having everything they want, being able to provide for them.”

Deanna receives food benefits, but it does not nearly cover what her family of four needs, and the community food pantry only provides a meager box of food items once a month—barely enough to make a few meals. Food resources are complicated by the fact that all her children have special dietary needs. Her oldest, with autism, is home-schooled. It is an environment that allows him to focus better, but he does not qualify for the no-cost breakfasts and lunches provided through the public school system. Her youngest attends school but only eats soft foods and receives a special diet through a gastrostomy tube.



Her middle child has Type 2 Diabetes, and the school meal program doesn’t consider special dietary needs.

Despite the difficulties, Deanna is thankful for their Medicaid coverage. A caseworker assigned by the program oversees transportation and appointments for the kids an hour away at Mott Children’s Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. However, it’s more than just managing their medical conditions. Dee is burned out by the kids’ required around-the-clock care. “The kids are supposed to have respite care as part of their Medicaid-approved action plan so I can have a break, but they are so medically challenged that no one wants to come; no one wants that responsibility.”

Deanna wants people to know that she’s more than a statistic; she is a real person living through this experience. The system needs to be overhauled to accommodate families with special needs, but she acknowledges that there is good, “Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful for everything I get, but it still needs to be fixed.” Lastly, she asks, “Quit looking down on people like us.”



Hispanic/Latino Families' Experiences with Food Access & Assistance

Hispanic/Latino Families' Experiences

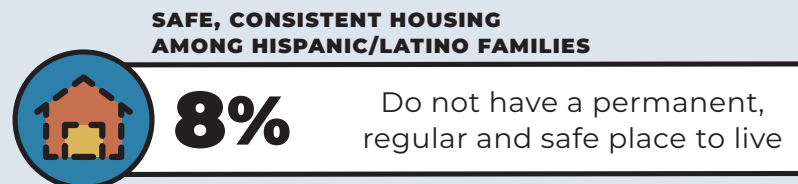
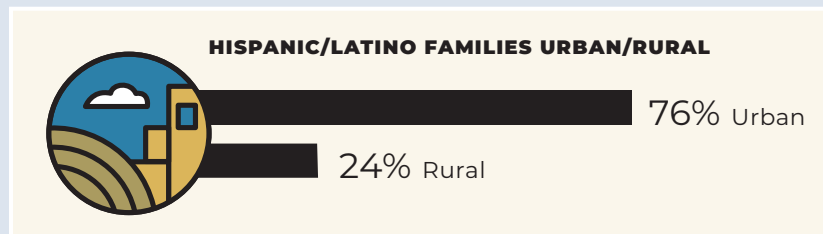
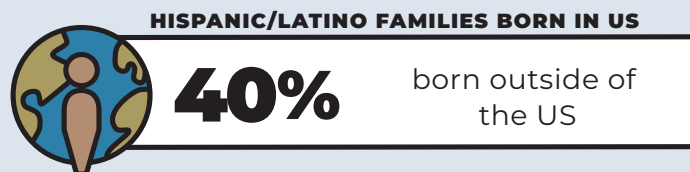
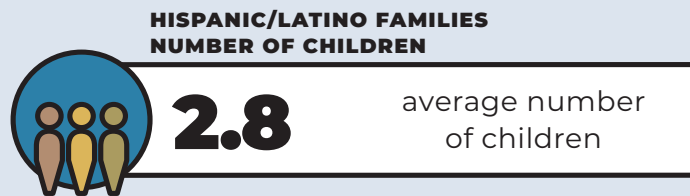
Over 560,000 Michiganders identify as Hispanic/Latino, equaling nearly 6% of the state's population. While many of these families reside in Detroit and Grand Rapids, Hispanic/Latino families have an important presence in all of Michigan's counties and make critical contributions to our state's social, cultural, and economic prosperity.

However, unfortunately, both nationwide and in Michigan, Hispanic/Latino households are more than 2 times more likely to experience food insecurity than White households. This disparity is driven by unequal access to sufficient wages and high-quality education due to systemic racism and discrimination, alongside complexities related to immigration. Food assistance programs also vary in their accessibility to immigrants without documentation and

uncertainty, distrust, and fear cause many Hispanic/Latino families to avoid using food assistance regardless of their individual or family's documentation status. Language and cultural barriers can further exacerbate the challenges faced by Hispanic/Latino households in accessing food assistance. Insufficiently translated materials, lack of knowledgeable agency staff, and limited outreach in preferred languages are important facets of this problem.

Through the engagement of our Parent Leadership Board, widespread recruitment within Hispanic/Latino communities, and outreach and engagement in Spanish, Feeding MI Families successfully enrolled 186 parents who identify as Hispanic/Latino, representing 15% of our total sample. This sample allowed us to dive deeply into the

Feeding MI Families Hispanic/Latino Participants



experiences of food access and food assistance among Michigan's Hispanic/Latino families to identify specific strengths, barriers, and needs to reduce our state's food security inequities.

Program Participation

Figure 13-2 shows participation in food assistance programs and use of informal assistance among Hispanic/Latino versus non-Hispanic/Latino households. A lower proportion of Hispanic/Latino families have ever participated in SNAP, likely because undocumented immigrants are not eligible for the program. Even if family members are documented or there is mixed documentation status within the household, individuals may be fearful to apply for benefits or unclear about their eligibility. Meanwhile, immigration status does not impact individuals' eligibility for WIC, which may be driving the high WIC participation rates among Feeding MI Families' Families.

Interestingly, Hispanic/Latino families were more likely than non-Hispanic/Latino families to report receiving food from friends or family, but much less likely to report having received money for food from friends or family. Culturally, Hispanic/Latino families make sure that others are fed. They often cook large portions and expect that guests will be eating with their family. Meanwhile, many feel that it is inappropriate to ask others for money and having to do so would elicit strong feelings of shame and embarrassment.

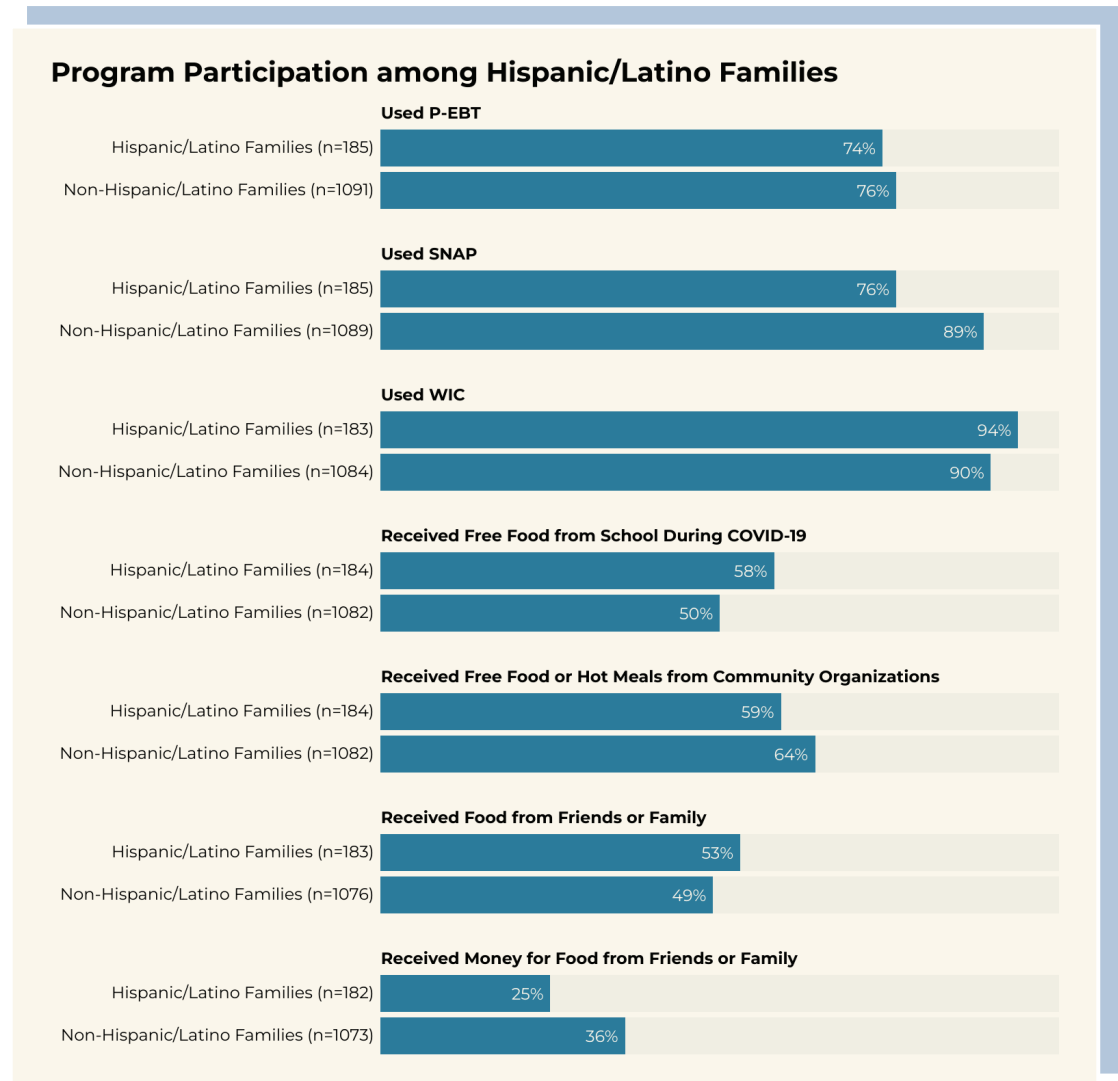


Figure 13-2

Program Satisfaction

In Figure 13-3, we see that Hispanic/Latino parents report higher satisfaction with all food assistance programs than non-Hispanic/Latino families. In our interviews with families, nearly all expressed great appreciation for assistance, no matter how big or small. Families who had immigrated to the US also commonly noted that similar programs were not available in their native countries and so they are grateful to have access to them now.

Discrimination, Mistreatment, and Fear

Looking at experiences of discrimination, Hispanic/Latino parents are slightly less likely to report being judged for using food assistance than non-Hispanic/Latino families. However, they are much more likely to report fearing mistreatment by food assistance programs. In our conversations with families, we learned that this is driven by ongoing fear and confusion related to undocumented families' eligibility for programs. Additionally, many parents reported having negative interactions with food assistance case workers, they believe because of their Latino ethnicity. Increasing the number of Spanish-speaking case workers and widely and clearly communicating how ones' immigration status impacts program eligibility, as well as how program participation impacts individuals' immigration status, would likely reduce fear of mistreatment.

Program Satisfaction of Hispanic/Latino Families

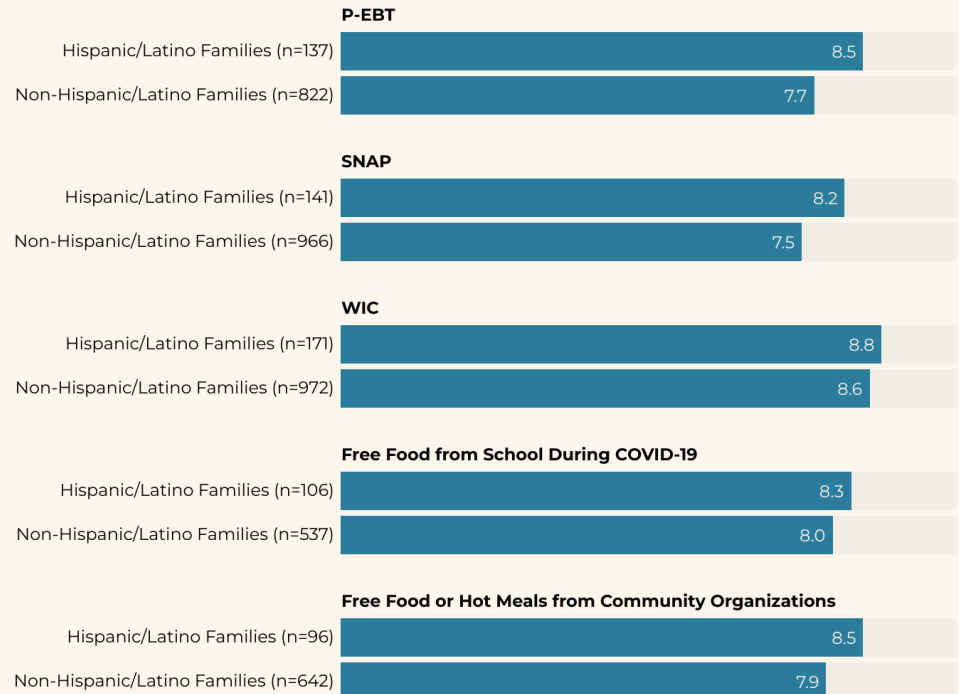


Figure 13-3

Experiences of Discrimination Related to Food Assistance

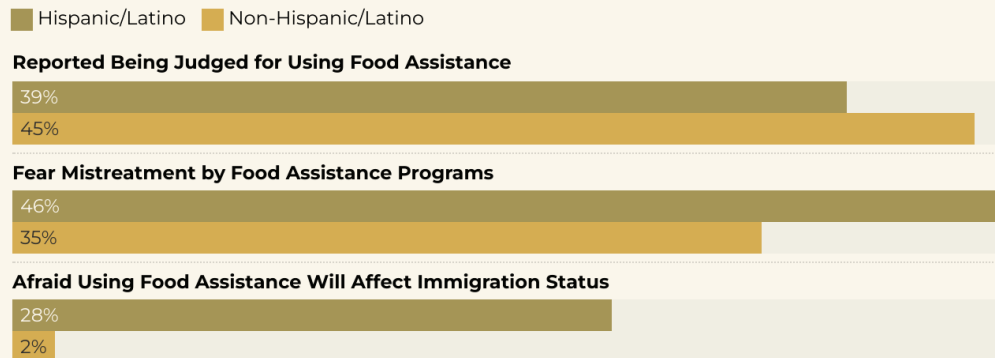
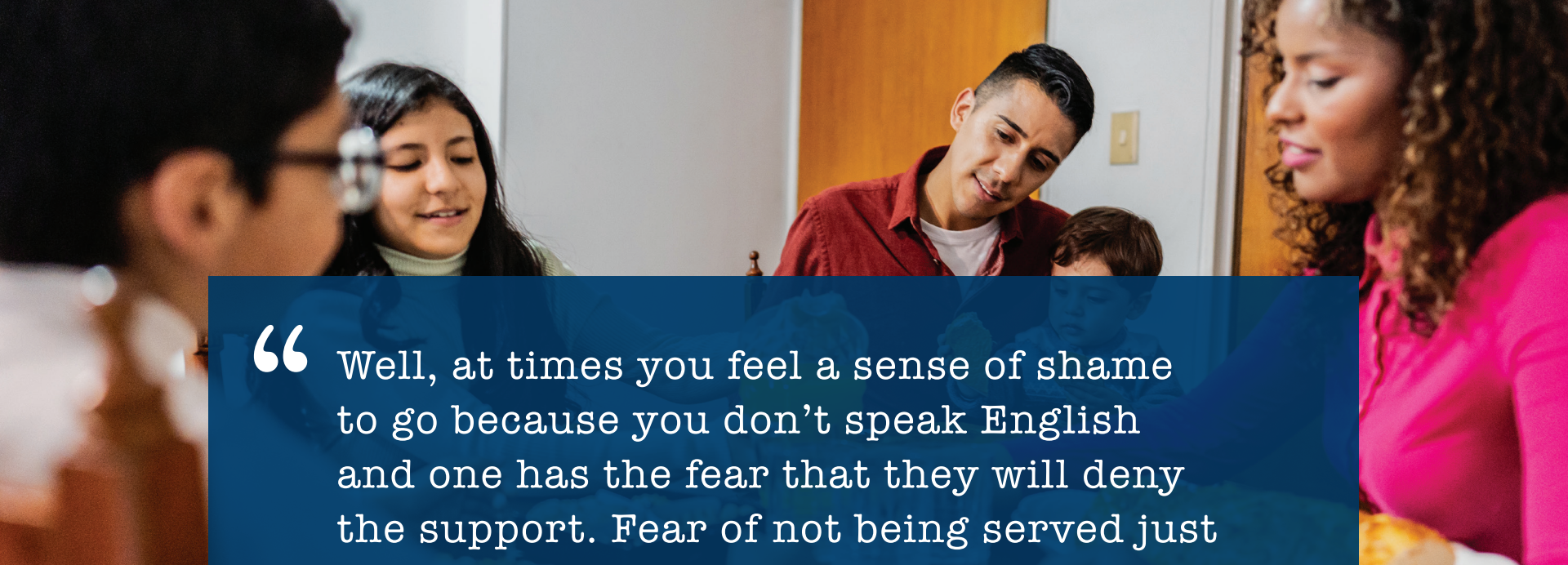


Figure 13-4



“ Well, at times you feel a sense of shame to go because you don't speak English and one has the fear that they will deny the support. Fear of not being served just because you are from a different country. ”

Quotes from Hispanic/Latino Participants

(Translated from Spanish to English)

“[I fear that] if I ask for food stamps they will take away my residency or they will charge me when I'm older.”

“Right now, food is very expensive and I have to choose between paying bills and purchasing groceries. In places where they give free food, like [removed], they can't provide enough for all of the families. I've had multiple times where they tell me that there is no more food available and to come back the next day.”

“[I] fear of being judged for my legal status now that there is so much racism.”

“[It would be fairer] if they're [SNAP benefits] equal, not only to citizens or residents. Because we too, immigrants, pay and file taxes. That is how it is in the United States, immigrants don't have anything.”



Families' Experiences with Food Access & Assistance in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Families' Experiences in Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP) is a place of incredible beauty, attracting growing numbers of summer vacationers and winter sports fanatics. At the same time though, many UP families persistently struggle with limited access to healthy food and food insecurity. Currently, nearly 38,000 households in the UP report being food insecure, equalling 13% of the total population.

Families from the UP are resilient and resourceful. However, year-round, well-paying employment can be hard to find and unemployment rates are higher in the UP than in the rest of Michigan. Housing costs have also steadily grown over the past decade, with many UP residents reporting that they are being outpriced by people coming into the UP to buy vacation

homes, including short-term rentals. Reliable transportation is also a necessity in the UP as families often must drive an hour or more to shop at big box stores for lower prices and a wider selection than what is offered at their local grocery stores. All of these factors together result in the need for greater investment and creative solutions to ensure that more UP families can reliably access sufficient amounts of healthy food.

Ninety-one parents from the UP participated in Feeding MI Families, representing 18% of all of Feeding MI Families' rural participants. These parents provided important insight into

Feeding Michigan Families Participants from the Upper Peninsula

SAFE, CONSISTENT HOUSING IN UPPER PENINSULA FAMILIES



4%

do not have a permanent, regular and safe place to live

DISABILITY IN UPPER PENINSULA FAMILIES

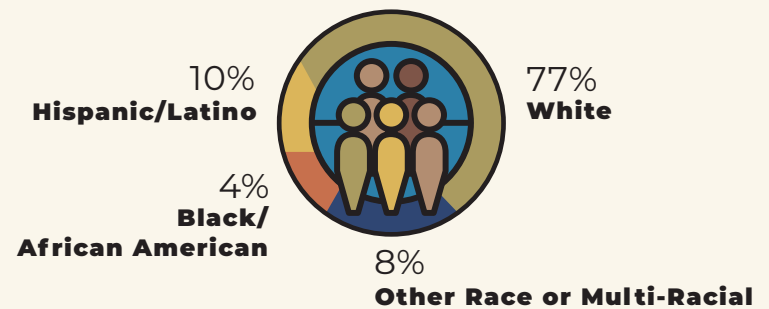


32%

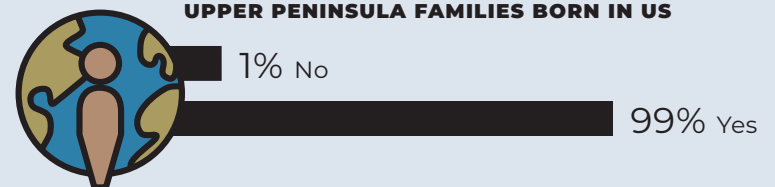
have a family member with a disability

Figures 14-1

RACE/ETHNICITY OF FAMILIES FROM THE UPPER PENINSULA



UPPER PENINSULA FAMILIES BORN IN US



the values, strengths, and ongoing needs of UP families experiencing food insecurity.

Program Participation

Overall, families in the UP use food assistance programs at a similar rate to other rural families. Notable exceptions however, are that more UP parents reported participating in WIC than other rural families, fewer used school food distribution programs during COVID-19, and UP families were more likely than other rural families to report receiving money from friends and family for food.



Program Participation among Upper Peninsula Families

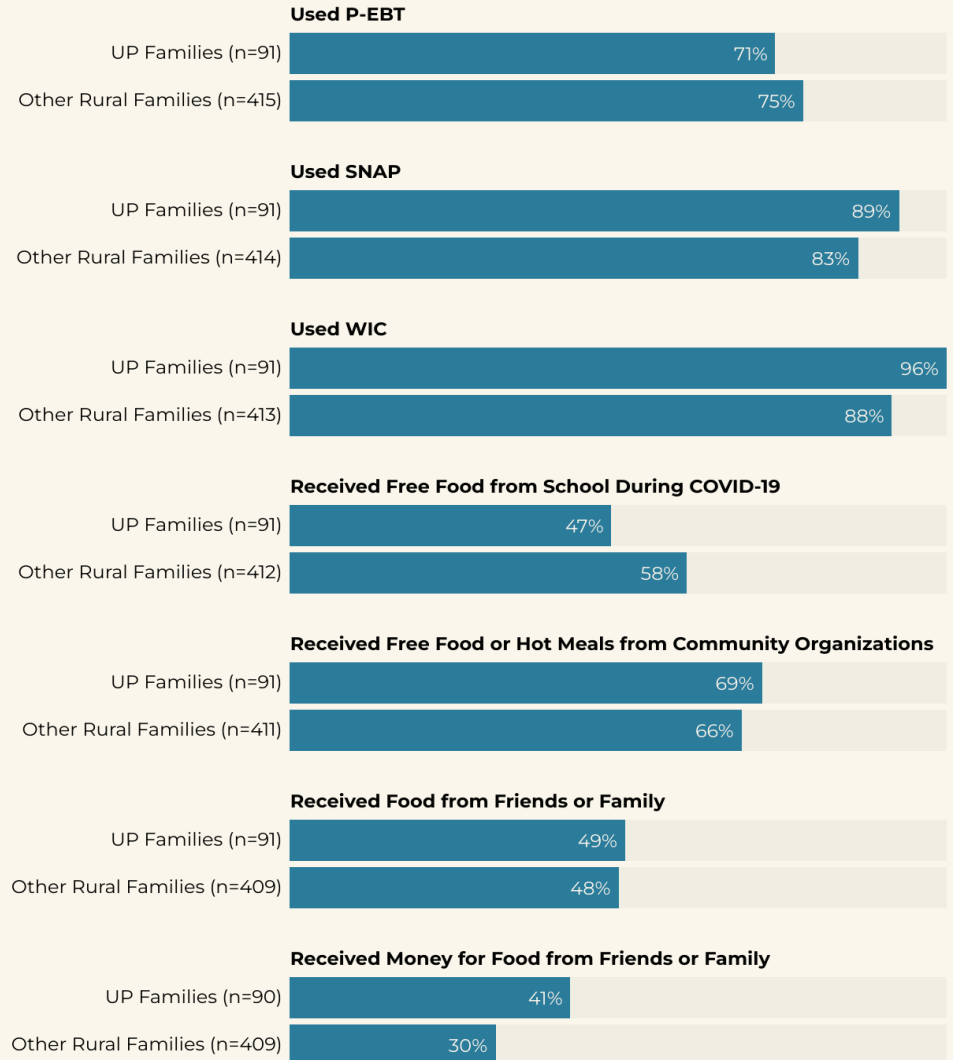
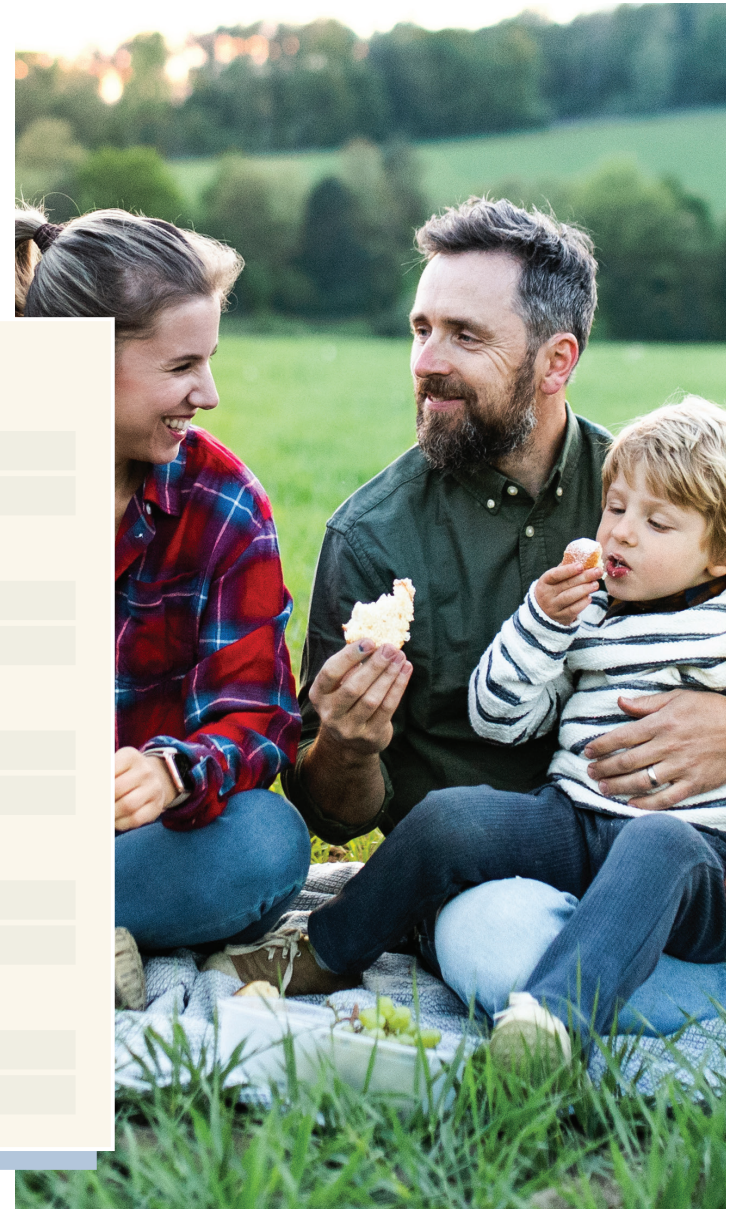


Figure 14-2

Program Satisfaction

Parents in the UP generally reported similar levels of satisfaction with food assistance programs compared to other rural families. However, UP parents reported very high satisfaction with WIC. As WIC is administered locally, this high satisfaction suggests that WIC programs in the UP provide families with exceptional attention and care.



Program Satisfaction of UP Families

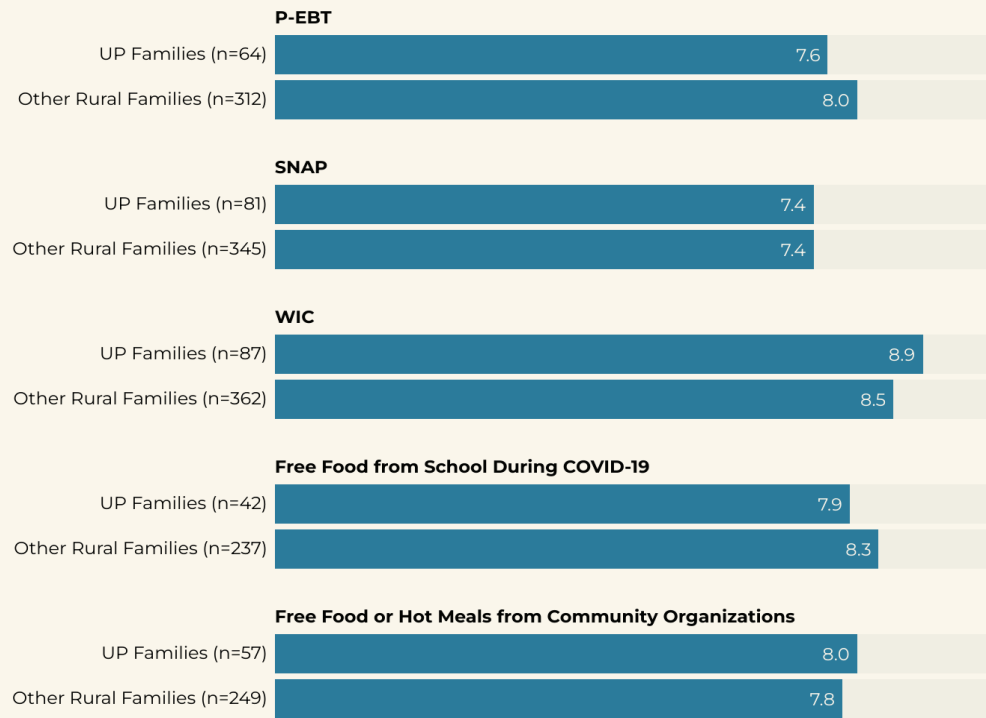


Figure 14-3



Unique Needs in the Upper Peninsula

“

Quotes from Participants Living in the UP

“[It would help if WIC was not] so selective on the brand or size container because small towns often don't carry that exact product so we can't always use all of our benefits.”

“I'm a very private person, living in a small town everyone knows your business.”

“Most programs require a ton of gas money as we don't live close to town.”

“We live in a rural food desert. There is one proper grocery store and it's insanely overpriced. Access to affordable food is difficult.”

“Small local stores tend to look down and act differently when you use Bridge Card...or even when you're buying in bulk at box stores the person checking out always has attitude, that's why I prefer ordering online when it's available.”

“I think there needs to be more programs out there for families that are struggling. Like, I know like, being in the UP, we don't have any resources, but more help with housing and more help with the food and help getting jobs and more programs. We need more programs.”

“When you're in poverty, you don't want to talk about it. There is such a negative stigma about needing food, needing to go to the food pantry, that people don't talk about it.

“We live in rural Michigan, and so what works in metro Detroit at Birmingham or like, the bougie schools down in Ann Arbor or whatever, that's not going to work in the middle of nowhere Michigan.”

“I live in a small community and we have a local grocery store but it's so expensive. We drive about 1 hour to do most of our grocery shopping and that makes our choices harder. Harder to get fresh fruit and veggies that last.”

“Having more affordable access [to produce] closer to home would be wonderful. We participated in a program last summer that brought us farm fresh products. We loved that and getting all the fresh stuff each week. We used to get farmers market coupons and enjoyed that.”



The Intersection of Food Insecurity & Disability among Michigan Families

Food Insecurity & Disability among Michigan Families

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts individuals with disabilities and their families. Nationwide in 2021, 28% of US households that included an adult out of the labor force



because of a disability were food insecure, as were 24% of households with an adult with a disability still in the labor force. In stark contrast, only 7% of households with an adult without a disability were impacted by food insecurity.

Food insecurity among individuals with disabilities is caused by the intersection of numerous challenges and unaddressed needs, some of which are universal to individuals with disabilities and some of which are unique to the specific disability experienced. For example, individuals with disabilities often face economic disadvantages, including higher rates of unemployment, underemployment, and limited access to education and training. Meanwhile, families that include someone with a disability need an additional \$17,690 per year to achieve the same standard of living as those without a family member with a disability.

This lack of fair and sufficient income is especially problematic for the disability community as many disabilities, such as autoimmune disorders and cardiovascular disease, require that individuals consume specific foods, which are often more expensive. Inadequate nutrition can, in turn, compromise immune function, exacerbating chronic illnesses, and impeding overall well-being, amplifying the health challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, mobility issues can create barriers to accessing food sources. Lack of transportation, inaccessible infrastructure, and difficulty navigating public spaces can prevent individuals with disabilities from reaching grocery stores.

Existing food assistance programs and policies do not sufficiently account for the specific needs and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. While some programs, such as SNAP/FAP, include special provisions for people with disabilities, these measures often fall short. As just one of many examples, individuals with vision or fine

Feeding Michigan Families Participants with a Disability in the Family

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FAMILIES THAT REPORTED A DISABILITY



2.9

average number of children

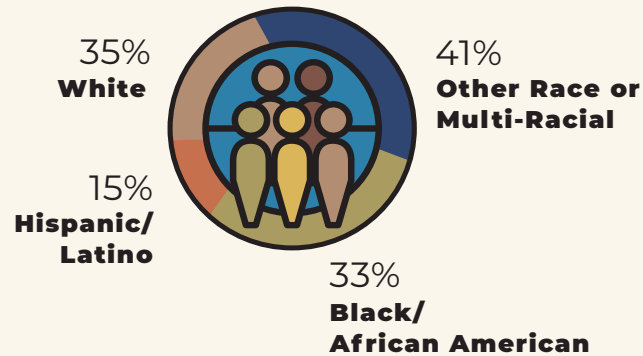
FAMILIES THAT REPORTED A DISABILITY



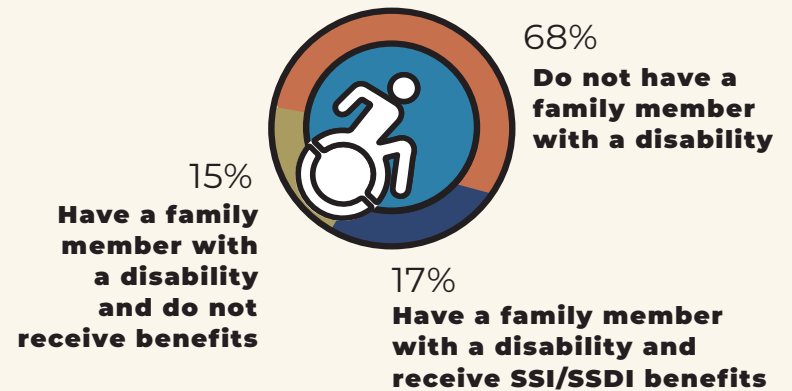
39 yrs

mean age of parent

RACE/ETHNICITY OF FAMILIES WITH A FAMILY MEMBER WITH A DISABILITY



HAS A DISABILITY



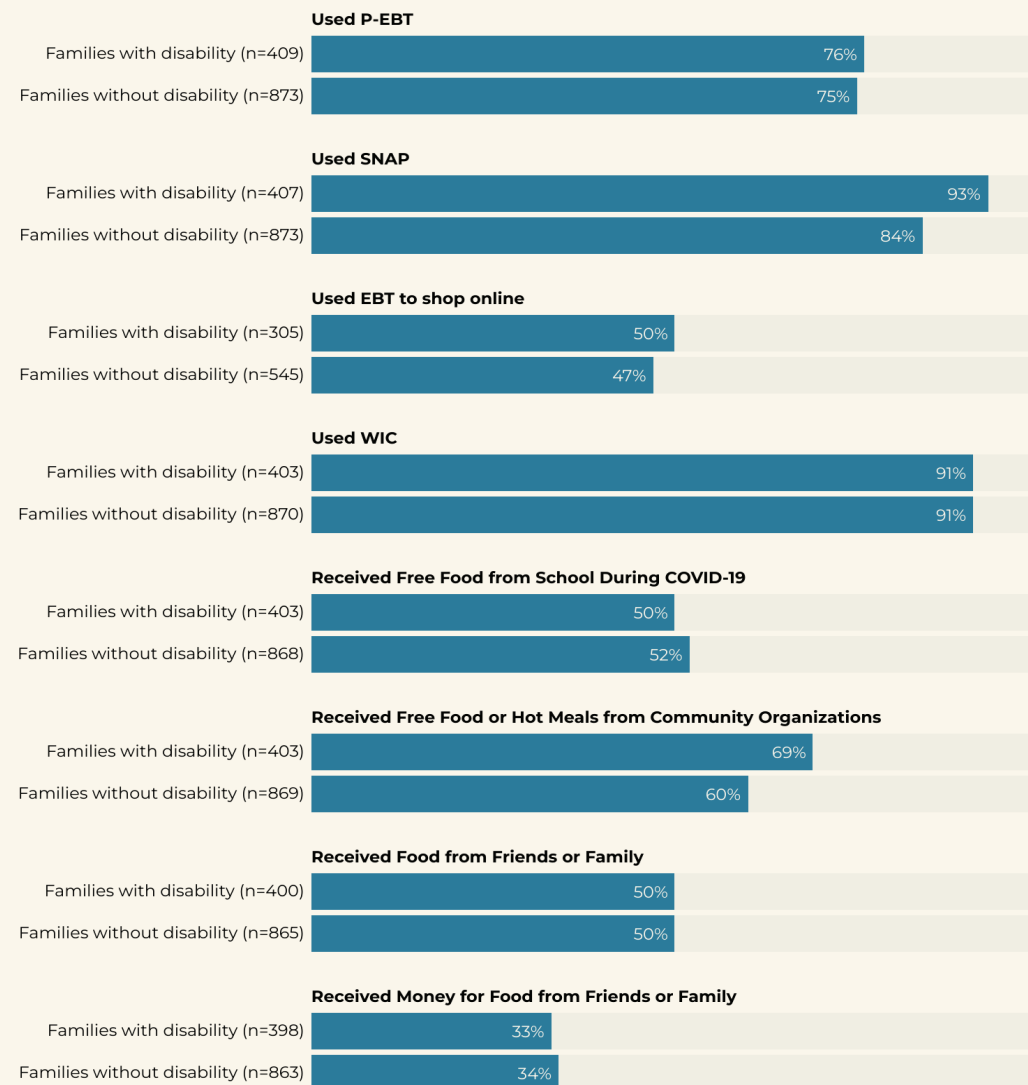
motor difficulties may struggle to navigate the online benefits application process, and connecting with a case worker over the phone or in person can be challenging due to high demand and limited resources. Ensuring that food assistance programs adequately address the needs of individuals with disabilities is crucial.

Guided in large part by the knowledge of our Parent Leadership Boards, the Feeding MI Families survey included two questions about disabilities among family members: “Do you or anyone else in your family have a disability?” and if the parent responds yes, they are asked, “Have you or anyone else in your family received disability benefits (SSI/SSDI) in the past 12 months?”

Program Participation

In general, individuals with family members with a disability (whether receiving SSI/SSDI or not) participated in food assistance programs at a similar rate to those without a family member with a disability and also reported a similar frequency of sometimes or often receiving food or money for food from friends or family. SNAP/FAP participation and use of charitable food were more common among families with a member with a disability.

Program Participation of Families With and Without a Disability



Program Satisfaction

Consistently, households with a member with a disability reported lower satisfaction with food assistance than those without (Figure 15-3). Parents' responses to the questions about how these programs could be improved provide some insight into factors that may be driving these lower satisfaction levels. Specifically, many parents talked about the food allergies, intolerances, and dietary needs of their family members. They described how these specific dietary requirements were expensive, rarely accommodated for by the charitable food system, and sometimes not covered by food benefits programs. Additionally, some parents spoke about the confusion that they experienced calculating their SNAP/FAP benefits in light of their SSI/SSDI benefits. Overall, having a family member with a disability can create great financial, emotional, and physical strain on families, increasing their need for fair, accessible and respectful food assistance.

Program Satisfaction of Families With and Without a Disability

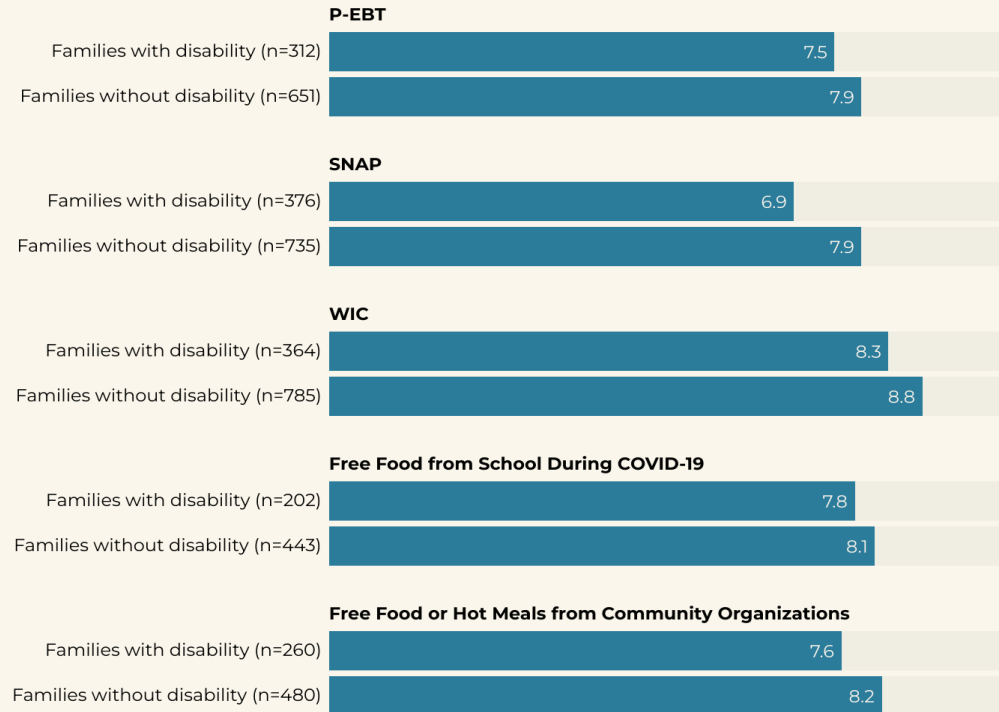


Figure 15-3





Quotes from Participants with a Disability in the Family

“We have food allergies, so that makes it really hard sometimes to get access to food. We have a gluten allergy and that limits our bread on WIC. And that’s one of our biggest problems with my youngest – she doesn’t like the corn tortillas, but she wants peanut butter and jellies a lot, so I have to spend like \$9 a loaf of bread.”

“I just haven’t [visited a food pantry] because of the food allergy. I didn’t think that there would be enough food that we could get and I’d have to give half of it away.”

“Having two kids with disabilities... I never know if I’m going to work a full week or not, you never know what’s gonna happen.... I have to worry about the grocery store when I can because I’m too busy trying to make sure that his fever doesn’t come back, make sure his asthma is under control while he has the flu, take him back and forth twice already to get injections.”

“I have my Disability money, they cut me off food stamps, and I don’t understand why.”

“Let kids, maybe teens, use the [EBT] card because... their parents are disabled. It’s hard for them because some of them have to go out and fend for themselves or get small things as they can because their parents can’t feed them.”

“My children also have celiac disease, which they can’t have any gluten, so the products are super, super expensive.”

“Increase [benefits if your] children are getting SSI. Usually one of the parents can’t work because they’re taking their children to therapist appointments and different things for the disability. It makes it hard to work a full-time job.”

“

I would love to see more gluten-free options on WIC and more allergy-friendly options as well. My daughter is allergic to peanut butter. And so, instead of getting peanut butter, it would be nice if we could have gotten almond butter.

”



Family Profile:

MEET THE COMBS FAMILY

When Amy Combs discovered she was pregnant at 18, the former high school dropout returned to school and got her diploma because she knew she had to do better now that she was responsible for a child. She moved home where she could have the loving support of her parents, but then her father passed away in 2014, followed by her mother in 2015. Amy was thrust into the real world, not equipped to handle the responsibility alone. Since then, she has been struggling to get back on her feet.

Now, the single mom of five continues to feel stuck. “It’s tough to find jobs during ‘mom hours’—when the kids are at school. I prioritize being a mom and am very honest about it going into job interviews.” Often, though, she finds trying to do better and get back on her feet adds more struggles. “If I don’t work, I’ll have food in the house for my kids, but I can’t get ahead and save money. If I work, I also can’t get ahead because I have no support as I get back on my feet during the transition.” She adds that the food assistance programs are amazing, but if she works too many hours, her assistance gets cut back, but the job pay doesn’t offset the lost benefits. Food assistance benefits have not increased despite historic inflation over the last few years, making matters worse. “I could buy enough food for two weeks and have a little extra, but now I have to supplement with the food pantry.”

Her oldest children are now teenagers and are sometimes embarrassed when other shoppers



notice them paying for groceries with the orange EBT card or in previous years when classmates saw they were getting no-cost meals at school. It doesn’t have to be that way. The change to all public school children getting no-cost meals took the stigma away from that experience, and a simple shift in the EBT card could equalize the grocery shopping experience, too.

“Teen pregnancy runs in my family, and I am always preaching to my older daughters about not making the mistakes I made.” She is also open about her battles. “They see what happens when you have babies at a young age and the struggles associated with that. I tell them to travel the world; they have plans. They are going somewhere in life.” Ultimately, she wants them to know there is hope.

When asked what she wants people to know about her experience, she says, “Everybody has a story; everyone has a battle. No one wants to live off this forever, but we need this assistance to put food on the table. Stop judging and maybe get to know someone and see what the struggles are.”



Conclusions

Feeding MI Families aimed to embed authentic parent voices into Michigan’s food security dialogue. From Day 1, our team worked within the tenets of Community Based Participatory Research and prioritized the knowledge of individuals with lived experience of food insecurity to develop our methods, materials, and products. Our Parent Leadership Boards became partners with project staff, and together, we worked to confront history and the status quo, and do better. We strived to let go of our egos, reflect on power and privilege, listen more than talk, value all voices, admit our missteps, and respect one another. It wasn’t always easy; many systems aren’t designed to truly support diversity. It is often easier to fall back on the easy ways of working – to assume those with the longest resumes know best, to hire the people who already know the technology, to prioritize those who can meet during “business hours.” But the easy ways will only lead us to where we’ve been for decades, marginalizing and excluding those whom we claim we are working to support.

We hope that Feeding MI Families inspires other organizations to fully and sincerely include individuals with lived experience of food insecurity in their leadership and operations. Toward that goal, and inspired by the work of Diane Sullivan, Co-Founder of Equitable Spaces, we are sharing our greatest lessons learned for how to build respectful, sustainable, and powerful collaborations:

Resist the temptation to push your agenda; show up to listen and learn. Many of our meetings with

our Parent Leadership Boards deviated from our agenda, and these were some of the most important conversations that we had. Our meetings created space for personal connections. All group members were encouraged to share the critical issues they were encountering in their day-to-day lives, we were able to connect with others across the state and learn that we were not alone in our challenges, and as a team, we learned how to pivot to address time-sensitive problems that families were facing. This flexibility engendered the trust and personal connections that were ultimately essential to accomplishing our project objective.

Organizational leadership must be open to being challenged and changing processes in response to the needs and perspectives of individuals with lived experience. If, realistically, individuals and organizations are not willing to change in meaningful ways, then it is disingenuous and unethical to build new collaborations.



All contributors must be fairly compensated. This may require working within your organization's administration to help them recognize that some employees may not fit the standard mold of our job descriptions or pay scales. That is not a valid reason for not compensating people for their contributions, experience, and value. Truthfully calculate the full cost of an individual's participation, including transportation, childcare, and the potential for loss of benefits (e.g., SNAP, TANF, SSI) due to increased taxable income.

Leaders should actively articulate the need for diversity of strengths and skills on their teams. Everyone brings something of value and is needed at the table. In Feeding MI Families,

we routinely devoted time during meetings to identify the skills and contributions of each of our team members.

Finally, allow people to participate in the ways that they can. Our Parent Leaders are superheroes. Many of them were balancing work responsibilities, extensive volunteer work, parenting and elder care expectations, and personal health challenges. This often meant that people called into meetings on their phones while driving, some watched meeting recordings and provided feedback at that point, and sometimes we skipped a synchronous meeting in favor of an active discussion via text or WhatsApp. We valued and compensated all of these contributions.

“

We keep just getting told that things are just the way they are because of policies and it's just the way it is. And I'm sitting here like, 'But can't policies change because weren't they written by people?' 'Can't we make this better'?

Mom of 5,
eastern UP

”

Feeding MI Families Conclusions

Top Recommendations for Improvement

The following table summarizes the parent-driven recommendations for improvement of all the food assistance programs studied in this report, using the three Feeding MI Families' themes. In many cases, although specific

| FEEDING MI FAMILIES' TOP RECOMMENDATIONS | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM | THEMES | | |
| | Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security | Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families | Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products |
| SNAP/FAP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents report negative interactions with SNAP/FAP case workers that leave them feeling disrespected and less likely to pursue benefits. Case workers would benefit from greater support and more manageable caseloads, allowing them to engage in respectful and comprehensive interactions with clients. Parents are frequently the target of stigmatizing interactions when shopping with their Bridge Card. Improvements in staff training; flexibility to pay with EBT through self-checkout, online, and “pay while you shop” options; and a more discreet design for the Bridge Card would all improve families' shopping experience. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allowable deductions to determine SNAP/FAP benefits do not accurately reflect families' expenses. Modifications to what expenses families are able to deduct from their gross income and increasing the maximum deduction allowed would provide families with greater benefits, which are desperately needed. Current benefit levels, particularly for families with household incomes just below the eligibility line, are not sufficient. State programs that expand or increase federal SNAP funding could help bridge the gap. Michigan should make use of all possible SNAP state options and waivers to bring the maximum federal SNAP dollars to the state and support more families. A “Bridge off SNAP” program that continued families' benefits for a limited period after parents begin working or receive a raise would give families time to get on their feet and pay off debts, increasing the likelihood that they remain employed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents are strongly supportive of nutrition incentive programs, such as Double Up Food Bucks, and would like to see these programs be consistently offered at more retailers across the state. Parents want to shop for local products, but food prices are much higher at their small, local grocery stores versus large chain stores further away. When parents receive more SNAP/FAP benefits, they are able to shop locally. |

recommendations align with one program, the broader lesson learned from parents can apply to many food assistance resources. Stigma and discrimination, administrative and bureaucratic barriers, and insufficient availability and accessibility of health-promoting foods keep Michigan families food insecure. We can do better.”

| FEEDING MI FAMILIES’ TOP RECOMMENDATIONS | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM | THEMES | | |
| | Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security | Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families | Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products |
| WIC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorrect labeling, lack of stock, and errors at checkout make redeeming benefits difficult and stressful for parents. Improving the WIC shopping experience by improving staff training, store signage, and point-of-sale devices would decrease the stigma of using WIC. • Parents would love to have the ability to use WIC to pay for eligible foods purchased online. Although this does not remove all barriers to redeeming benefits and many parents will still prefer shopping in-person, families will be more likely to stay enrolled in WIC as their children move out of infancy if they could shop online when needed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many parents are aware of WIC and most eligible families participated in WIC when their children were infants. Increasing programmatic flexibilities including expanding food package options and allowing benefits to roll over between months would make the program more useful to parents of older children. • Parents want more variety in which formulas are eligible for purchase with WIC. This is particularly important for families shopping at small, local stores that are often out of stock of specific formula brands and sizes. • Attending appointments in person is difficult for some families, especially as they have more children and they get older. Parents appreciated COVID-era flexibilities including the ability to complete education online, and would like these options to become permanent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents see WIC as a critical program for providing their families with fresh produce. Overall, they are extremely grateful for the benefits. • Expanding the food types, brands, and allowable package sizes of WIC-eligible foods would ensure that families could more fully redeem their benefits. |

Table 16-1 (cont.)

FEEDING MI FAMILIES' TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

| FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM | THEMES | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| | Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security | Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families | Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products |
| P-EBT with implications for the Summer EBT program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As with SNAP/FAP, parents requested that EBT cards have a discreet design to reduce negative comments from other grocery shoppers or retail staff. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> With Summer EBT becoming established in Michigan, it is essential that all families are made aware of program eligibility and the timing and amount of benefits. Lack of clarity and inconsistent awards made food budgeting difficult for families. Wherever possible, minimize the logistic barriers to activating and using the Summer EBT card. Parents struggled with needing to get online and using a password to activate the card. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the possibility of connecting Summer EBT with Double Up Food Bucks to further stretch families' benefits and increase children's access to local, fresh produce. |
| School Food Distribution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School food distribution programs always need to be aware of the potential for stigma against children perceived to be low-income or food insecure. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many parents were unsure of their eligibility to receive food from school and did not feel they understood the process well enough to feel comfortable participating in the distribution program. Families would benefit from widespread, simple communications about food programs through multiple channels. Busy families benefit from flexibility in food distribution including variety in the days and hours that programs operate. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whenever possible, consider ways to minimize the distribution of highly processed foods and prioritize fresh food, including produce. Families with children with specific dietary needs struggle to find safe free or low-cost foods. Food distribution programs should, if possible, provide families access to foods that are safe for children with common food allergies or other medical dietary needs. |

Table 16-1 (cont.)

| FEEDING MI FAMILIES' TOP RECOMMENDATIONS | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM | THEMES | | |
| | Stigma and Discrimination are Central Barriers to Food Security | Small Modifications Make Big Differences to Families | Families Want Dignified Access to Fresh and Safe Produce, Proteins, and Dairy Products |
| Charitable Food System | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many families feel that using a food pantry or hot food program is a last resort, they feel ashamed of having no other choice but to use them and don't want their children to be aware that they are using the charitable food system. Reducing the stigma of needing charitable food and improving the environment of food pantries/food distribution sites should be a priority to ensure that families who need food feel comfortable accessing it. • Clear communication about days and hours open, ensuring generous and empathetic staff and volunteers, and allowing food choice are all strategies that parents reported made them feel more comfortable using the charitable food system. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing foods offered to be able to make a complete meal and assisting families via providing recipes, no-cook options, etc. can greatly improve parents' experiences. • Many programs are open for limited hours during the traditional work week. Prioritizing flexibility of operating days and hours will increase access and reduce stress on families. • Many families need to be able to access charitable food more than once a week or more than once a month. Whenever possible, programs should evaluate their policies and consider whether restrictions such as these are necessary for effective operation. • Allowing families a choice of food types and portion sizes can increase program satisfaction and decrease food waste. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many parents with family members with food allergies or other medical dietary needs found food pantries and hot food programs to be inaccessible, leading them to have to spend more of their budget on food from grocery stores. Food banks and pantries can place a higher priority on providing foods safe for individuals with allergies, gluten intolerance, diabetes, etc. • Offering near date, expired, or spoiled food makes many families feel less than and is perceived as a form of discrimination. Education about "best by" dates may help some families feel more comfortable using these foods, but other families will perceive these efforts as pressure to eat food that is not safe and/or has been cast off by others. |

Table 16-1 (cont.)

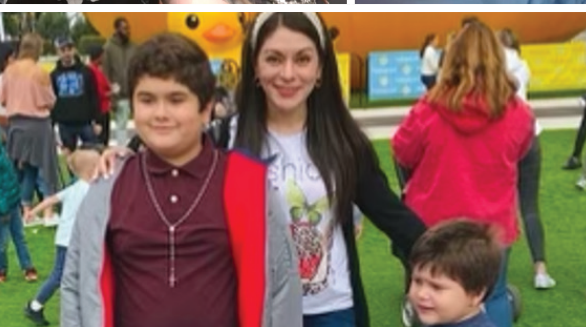
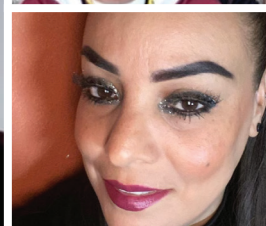
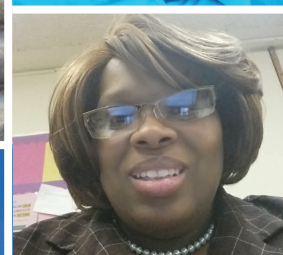
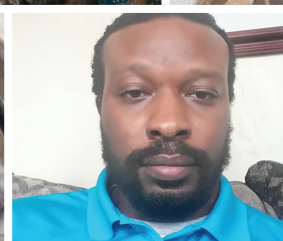
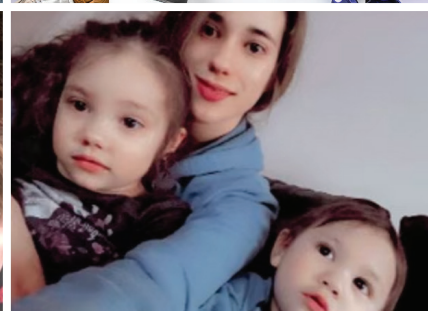
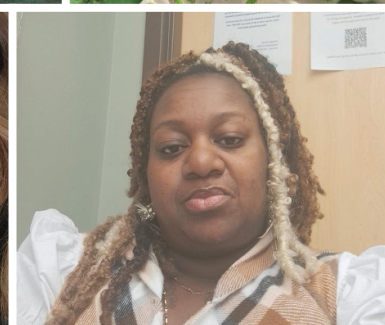
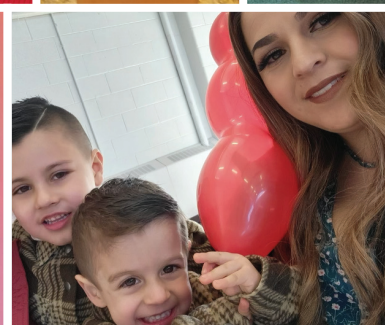
Acknowledgments

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| | | | |
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Appendix A: Feeding MI Families Screener and Survey

Eligibility Screener

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|--|---------------------------------|
| Thank you for your interest in Feeding MI Families. Your information will be kept private and secure. We will not share any information that identifies you. Your information will NOT be shared with the government and will NOT impact your public assistance or immigration status. You are only allowed to participate one time. | |
| We will now send you questions to determine if you are eligible for Feeding MI Families. Please text back your response. Are you the parent, primary caregiver, or guardian of any children? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| How old is your youngest child in years? Include children you are the guardian or primary caregiver for. If your child is less than 1 year old, respond 0. | |
| What year were you born in? | |
| In the past 12 months, have you ever worried that your family's food would run out? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| In the last 12 months, did the food you bought ever not last and you weren't able to buy more? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| What is your ZIP code? | |

English Survey Questions

There were minor differences in the inclusion/phrasing of some questions between our urban and rural surveys. These differences did not affect participants' responses or the information provided in this report.

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|---|------------------|
| Would you like to continue this survey by text or through a phone call with our staff? | |
| Thank you! A Feeding MI Families staff member will call you within the next week from 734-249-6650. | |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|--|--|
| <p>We will now text you questions about food and food assistance.</p> <p>To skip any questions, respond SKIP.</p> <p>The survey will take about 20 minutes. You can answer the questions all at once or over a few days.</p> <p>Once you complete the questions, we will email you a \$25 Amazon gift card in the next 2 weeks.</p> <p>We reserve the right to review your responses and not pay participants determined to be fraudulent.</p> <p>If you need support, please call 734-249-6650.</p> | |
| <p>How many children do you have? Remember to include any children you are the guardian or primary caregiver for.</p> | |
| <p>How many of your children live with you right now?</p> | |
| <p>How old are you?</p> | |
| <p>How do YOU AND YOUR FAMILY identify?</p> <p>Please text back the number of your response. For example, if you and your family identify as Hispanic or Latino, text back 1.</p> <p>If you would like to pick multiple categories, separate with commas. Example: 1,2</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hispanic or Latino 2. Black or African American 3. White 4. Asian 5. American Indian/ Alaska Native 6. Middle Eastern/ North African 7. Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander 8. Another race or ethnicity |
| <p>What other race or ethnicity does your family identify as?</p> | |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|---|--|
| <p>How do YOU identify? Please text back the number of your response. If you would like to pick multiple categories, separate with commas. Example: 1,2</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hispanic or Latino 2. Black or African American 3. White 4. Asian 5. American Indian/ Alaska Native 6. Middle Eastern/ North African 7. Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander 8. Another race or ethnicity |
| <p>What other race or ethnicity do you identify as?</p> | |
| <p>What country were you born in?</p> | |
| <p>Do you speak a language other than English at home?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>How do you describe your gender? Please text back the number of your response.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Male 2. Female 3. Not listed |
| <p>Do you or anyone else in your family have a disability?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Have you or anyone else in your family received disability benefits (SSI/SSDI) in the past 12 months?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Does your family have a permanent, regular, and safe place to live?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Does your home have running water (does not include cisterns)?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|--|---|
| <p>Is the tap water in your home safe to drink? Please text back the number of your response.</p> | <p>1. Yes 2. Only with a filter 3. No 4. Not sure</p> |
| <p>P-EBT is a program that provides families money on an EBT/Bridge Card during the summer and when schools are closed because of COVID-19. Has your family ever used P-EBT?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Using a scale of 1 to 10, 1-not at all satisfied to 10-very satisfied, how satisfied are you with the P-EBT program?</p> | |
| <p>How can P-EBT be improved?</p> | |
| <p>SNAP (also known as food stamps) is a program that provides families money to purchase food using an EBT/Bridge Card. Has your family used SNAP (food stamps) in the past year?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Has your family ever used SNAP (food stamps)?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>What are some reasons that your family has not used SNAP (food stamps)?</p> | |
| <p>You can now use an EBT/P-EBT/Bridge Card to buy food online using Amazon, Meijer, Instacart, etc. Has your family used an EBT/P-EBT/Bridge Card to buy food online?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>What are some reasons that your family has not used an EBT/P-EBT/Bridge Card to buy food online?</p> | |
| <p>On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with SNAP (food stamps)?</p> | |
| <p>How can SNAP (food stamps) be improved?</p> | |
| <p>You're halfway done! Just a reminder that you will receive a \$25 gift card for finishing the survey. To skip any questions, just respond SKIP. If you need help, please call 734-249-6650.</p> | |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|---|--|
| <p>WIC provides pregnant women, new mothers, and children under 5 benefits to buy healthy food.</p> <p>Has your family used WIC in the past year?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>Has your family ever used WIC?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>What are some reasons that your family has not used WIC?</p> | |
| <p>On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with WIC?</p> | |
| <p>Starting in June 2021, WIC increased the benefits to buy fruits and vegetables.</p> <p>Was this additional money for fruit and vegetables useful for your family?</p> <p>Please text back the number of your response.</p> | <p>1. Yes 2. No 3. I didn't know about the additional money.</p> |
| <p>How can WIC be improved?</p> | |
| <p>During COVID-19, many schools distributed free food to families. Families either needed to pick up this food or it was delivered.</p> <p>Did your family get free food from school during COVID-19?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>What are some reasons that your family did not get free food from school during COVID-19?</p> | |
| <p>On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied were you with schools free food distribution programs during COVID-19?</p> | |
| <p>How can schools improve their free food distribution programs?</p> | |
| <p>There are many community organizations that provide families free food or hot meals including food pantries, churches, and YMCAs.</p> <p>Has your family ever gotten free food or hot meals from places like these?</p> | <p>Text Y for yes Text N for no</p> |
| <p>What are some reasons that your family has not gotten free food or hot meals from community organizations such as food pantries, churches, and YMCAs?</p> | |
| <p>On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not at all and 10 being very much, how satisfied are you with food or hot meals from community organizations?</p> | |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|---|---|
| How can free food or hot meals from community organizations be improved? | |
| Have you ever been judged because you use food assistance? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| Have you ever worried that you will be mistreated by food assistance programs? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| Have you ever been afraid that using food assistance will affect your immigration status? | Text Y for yes Text N for no |
| Please share anything you want to tell us about your experience of being judged, mistreated, or fearful related to food assistance. | |
| How often do friends, family, or social groups give your family food so you have enough to eat? Please text back the number of your response. | 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often |
| How often do friends, family, or social groups help you out with money so your family can have enough to eat? Please text back the number of your response | 1. Never 2. Rarely 3. Sometimes 4. Often |
| What other resources have helped you feed your family during COVID? | |
| Please share anything else you want to tell us about accessing food, using food assistance, or feeding your family. | |
| Thank you! The next questions will be used to process your payment. | |
| What is your first and last name? | |
| What is your email address? If you do not have an email, type NONE and we will call you at this number to get your mailing address. | |
| Are you interested in participating in a phone interview to share more about your experiences? Parents completing an interview can receive an extra \$50 gift card. | |

English Survey Questions (cont.)

| QUESTION | RESPONSE OPTIONS |
|--|------------------|
| <p>Thank you! We will contact you if you have been selected for an interview.</p> <p>We will email a \$25 Amazon gift card link in 1-2 weeks. We reserve the right to review your responses and not pay participants determined to be fraudulent.</p> <p>For more information, please visit FeedingMIFamilies.org or contact us at 734-249-6650. To find resources in your community, please visit https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-find-community-partners?language=en_US</p> | |
| <p>Thank you! Your survey is complete.</p> <p>We will email a \$25 Amazon gift card link in 1-2 weeks. We reserve the right to review your responses and not pay participants determined to be fraudulent.</p> <p>For more information, please visit FeedingMIFamilies.org or contact us at 734-249-6650. To find resources in your community, please visit https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-find-community-partners?language=en_US</p> | |

Appendix B: Feeding MI Families Interview Guide

Note: This template was merged with survey information provided by the participant to probe about specific experiences, desires, and ideas that parents have to improve food access and food assistance. Therefore, each participant had a different interview guide depending on their responses to the survey questions.

Introduction

As you may remember, the goal of Feeding MI Families is to use parents' expertise to improve food access in Michigan. Parents are smart, resourceful, and creative - and we know that you have the real, on the ground information about food and food assistance in your community.

Today in this interview, we want to dive deeper into some of the things you told us in your survey. We want you to know that we are listening to you, and your ideas can make a difference for Michigan families.

The questions I'm going to ask you today were made by parents, for parents. As we go through the questions, you are welcome to stop at any time or skip a question if you don't feel comfortable. This is your time to share your thoughts and also think outside the box about what changes we can make together. Everything you tell us will remain private, we will not share any information that would identify you.

Questions

1. Through your text messages, we learned a little bit about your family. Can you tell me a bit more about your family?
 - a. Probe for living situation/configuration, children in the home, adults in the home, housing security, employment, and disabilities based on survey responses.
2. You shared with us that you participated in [PROGRAM].
 - a. What are some of the things that you liked about [PROGRAM]?
 - b. What are some of the things that didn't work well about [PROGRAM]?
 - c. How would you like to see [PROGRAM] improved?
3. You shared with us that you've never participated in [PROGRAM]. Can you tell me more about that?
4. **[If the participant reported being judged/mistreated]** You also shared with us in your text messages that you have felt judged or mistreated because of your use of food assistance.
 - a. What happened in those situations?
 - b. What could be changed so other families don't have the same experience?
5. What is the top thing that needs to be fixed to make sure that families like yours can access enough of the foods that they want?
6. If we could wave a magic wand and make sure that your family never had to worry about affording food again, what would that look like for your family?
 - a. Probe if the participant doesn't understand the question or doesn't have new ideas for how things could change:
 - If you were able to make sure that families in your community had enough food to eat, what would you do?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?





**We're listening.
We're learning.**
FEEDING MI FAMILIES

Each year, hundreds of thousands of Michigan parents worry whether they can afford to feed their families.

Many of these parents have turned to government programs, food pantries, and friends and family for help, while others are not eligible for assistance or are too ashamed to let others know they are struggling. Guided by years of lived experience, these parents have unparalleled insight into how to increase food security in Michigan. They have thought deeply about which resources work for their families, how programs could be improved, and what life would be like if they never again had to worry about affording food. Yet, despite this depth of knowledge, these parents are rarely, if ever, allowed the position and power to guide food access programs and policies.

Supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Michigan Farm Bureau Family of Companies, Feeding MI Families aimed to elevate families' knowledge of food insecurity and center parents' hard-earned expertise to build parent-driven recommendations for improving assistance and healthy food access in Michigan. Ultimately, we want to infuse the food security dialogue with authentic parent voices and identify programmatic and policy priorities that not only patch holes in the existing safety net but also provide creative alternatives to existing structures and policies. We hope Feeding MI Families inspires change and motivates others to recognize that no decision about how communities will be served should be made without meaningful and respectful community inclusion.



**We're listening.
We're learning.**