



# Food Security in New Jersey: A Brief Primer on the Six Dimensions of Food Security

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## Introduction

Food security is a complex social condition with continually changing and interacting factors with underlying causes. There are multiple ways to define and measure food security. The New Jersey Office of the Food Security Advocate (OFSA) has adopted a definition from the United Nations’ High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition found in the [Food Security and Nutrition: Building a Global Narrative Towards 2030 report](#).

*“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”*

This definition is based on six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability. Food insecurity may result from limitations in any of the six dimensions because each depends on and interacts with the others.

Centering this framework means that achieving food security across New Jersey requires addressing these challenges through varied approaches, from community-driven initiatives to broad policy solutions and with dynamic resources to support the broad spectrum of needs. By working collaboratively across sectors and engaging diverse stakeholders, New Jersey can build a system that ensures access to nutritious food for all residents, now and in the future.

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This brief primer is a summary and selection of text/references to introduce the six dimensions to define food security and their application in the context of NJ. This document will be expanded and updated in early Summer 2024.



## Factors Impacting Food Security

Food security in New Jersey is influenced by a complex mix of economic, social, and environmental factors. These factors are present within societal-level systems, including systems understood to have inequities and injustices. Therefore, factors impacting food security are experienced differently across various communities, including distinctions based on race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and other characteristics.

### Socio-Economic Factors

Primary factors contributing to food insecurity are income and poverty. According to the latest data, over 870,000 individuals (9.7%) experience poverty in New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> The burden of poverty is distributed to communities in systemically inequitable ways for race or ethnicity, with 16.1% of Black individuals and 16.5% of Hispanic or Latino individuals experiencing food insecurity compared to 7.1% of white individuals.<sup>1</sup>

Unemployment and high cost of living also contribute to food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> In 2023, over 214,000 New Jersey residents (4.4%) experienced unemployment in an average month.<sup>3</sup> With the state consistently ranked among the most expensive places to live in the United States, even New Jerseyans with full-time employment can face financial strain due to elevated housing, food, and healthcare costs, making it difficult to afford sufficient, safe, and nutritious food.

### Environmental Factors

The physical food environment also impacts food security. Proximity to a grocery store impacts food security by, in-part, determining how easily New Jersey residents can access fresh, varied, and nutritious foods. When grocery stores and markets are located far from where people live, individuals may struggle to get to places where their preferred and healthy foods are available. According to the latest data, over 321,000 New Jersey residents (4%) have limited access to healthy foods, meaning they have low income and do not live close to a grocery store.<sup>4</sup> Inadequate public transportation options and the high cost of private transportation can exacerbate this issue. Without nearby grocery stores or accessible transportation, individuals may be more likely to get food at nearby convenience stores or fast-food outlets, which can have a limited variety and reduced quality of food options compared to a full-service grocery store.

Agricultural and broader environmental factors also play a role in the food security status of communities across the state. In recent years, New Jersey has experienced increased extreme weather events due to climate change<sup>5,6</sup>, including coastal nor'easters, hurricanes, flooding, and heat waves, which have disrupted food harvests, agricultural infrastructure, and distribution networks.<sup>7,8</sup> Urban sprawl, unsustainable farming practices, and land degradation present challenges to agricultural productivity in New Jersey. Since the 1980's, New Jersey has lost 205,000 acres of farmland due to urban sprawl.<sup>9,10</sup> Additional food system factors such as food waste and the export of much of New Jersey's agricultural products impact food security within the state.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. [2022 American Community Survey Data](#).

<sup>2</sup> Severity of Household Food Insecurity Is Sensitive to Change in Household Income and Employment Status among Low-Income Families. *The Journal of Nutrition*.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. [Regional and State Unemployment - 2023 Annual Averages](#).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service's [Food Access Research Atlas](#).

<sup>5</sup> New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

<sup>6</sup> [New Jersey State Climate Summary 2022](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Rutgers New Jersey Climate Change Resource Center](#).

<sup>8</sup> [New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection](#).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture. [2022 Census of Agriculture Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level](#).

<sup>10</sup> NJ Spotlight and NJTV News. [Farming Flourishes in the Garden State](#).

<sup>11</sup> New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. [October 2023 Food Waste Reduction Plan](#).

# The Six Dimensions of Food Security<sup>12</sup>

## Availability

**Availability is the physical presence of foods.**

Availability refers to individuals having enough quantity, sufficient quality, and nutritional foods physically present in a person's environment. This includes the supply and distribution of foods at stores, markets, gardens, and other places where individuals obtain food.

## Access

**Access is the resources and means to obtain foods.**

Access refers to individual or household resources and means needed to obtain appropriate and nutritious foods. This includes both economic and physical resources. This dimension also considers the level of resources needed to ensure that access to food does not compromise satisfactory access to other basic needs like housing or health care.

## Utilization

**Utilization is the intake of sufficient and safe foods.**

It refers to the intake of sufficient and safe food and water to meet nutritional needs. This includes individuals' knowledge, skills, and confidence in planning meals and buying, preparing, and cooking foods. It also includes their access to food safety knowledge, skills, tools, and resources.

## Agency

**Agency is the power to make decisions about foods eaten and produced.**

As a dimension of food security, agency refers to individuals' and communities' capacity to make decisions and take actions to shape their own relationships with food and food systems. This includes making choices about what they eat, the foods they produce, and how they are produced, processed, and distributed.

## Sustainability

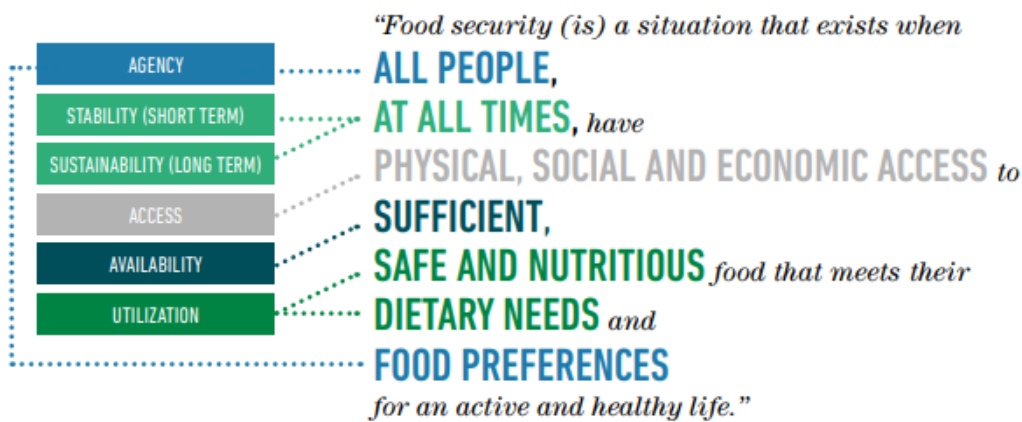
**Sustainability is the food system's ability to provide long-term food security.**

It refers to food system practices that contribute to the long-term regeneration of natural, social, and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of present generations are met without compromising the food needs of future generations.

## Stability

**Stability is the reliable supply of foods over time.**

Stability in food security refers to maintaining adequacy in food availability, access, and utilization over time. Stability in these dimensions must be maintained during sudden, short-term shocks and cyclical or seasonal changes. For example, the ability to maintain food availability, access, and utilization during a seasonal job layoff, the onset of a health condition, periods of inflation, or natural disaster.



<sup>12</sup> HLPE. 2020. *Food security and nutrition: building a global narrative towards 2030*. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

## Impacts of Food Security

Navigating food insecurity leads individuals and households to implement various behavioral and economic coping strategies to meet their needs. Food insecurity and its associated coping strategies are related to several negative physical and mental health outcomes as well as negative economic implications for households and the broader community.

Coping strategies related to hunger and food insecurity can include reducing food intake, eating less nutritious or preferred foods, borrowing food or money from friends and relatives, selling personal property, watering down food/drink, growing a garden, accessing support from community organizations, and choosing between food and medical care, utilities, transportation, and housing.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

### Health Impacts

There is a strong established connection between food security and health. Food insecurity is associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes, including diabetes, kidney disease, obesity, heart disease, depression, stress, and anxiety.<sup>15,16,17</sup> Diet related diseases are some of the leading causes of preventable deaths in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Populations disproportionately impacted by systems of oppression are disproportionately impacted by the consequences of food insecurity.

Over 1 in 4 adults (28.6%) had obesity in 2020 in New Jersey.<sup>19</sup> Obesity affected 39.9% of Black individuals and 32.6% of Hispanic or Latino individuals compared to 25.5% of white individuals. Individuals (aged 25+)

with fewer years of education are also disproportionately impacted by food insecurity. Similar patterns and trends exist with the proportion of individuals with diagnosed diabetes.

### Maternal and Child Health Impacts

Food insecurity is associated with pregnancy complications (e.g. gestational diabetes, iron deficiency), low-birth weight, and developmental risks.<sup>20,21,22</sup> Proper nutrition in early life is critical for cognitive development, school performance, and social skills. Children who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk of developing chronic conditions such as asthma, and are associated with greater challenges in academic performance, educational attainment, and behavioral or social-emotional problems.<sup>15,22,23,</sup>

### Economic Impacts

On an individual level, food insecurity can contribute to a cycle of poverty and poor health. The physical and mental health conditions associated with food insecurity, can make it difficult for an adult to study or work, diminishing their earning potential. In-turn, food insecurity is associated with higher health care costs, further straining household budgets.<sup>24</sup> Adults experiencing food insecurity face annual healthcare expenditures approximately \$1,863 higher than those that are food secure.<sup>25</sup> At the societal level, the economic repercussions of food insecurity are also significant. A study assessing healthcare costs related to food insecurity estimated that in 2016, the annual economic health care-related toll of food insecurity in New Jersey amounted to \$1.3 billion.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bezuneh, M., & Yiheyis, Z. (2020). [Household food insecurity, coping strategies, and happiness: The case of two public housing communities](#). *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*

<sup>14</sup> Feeding America. [Hunger in America 2014: National Report](#).

<sup>15</sup> Food Research & Action Center. [The Impact of Poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being](#)

<sup>16</sup> Food Research & Action Center. [Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs' Role in an Equitable Recovery](#).

<sup>17</sup> Gundersen, C., Ziliak, J., & Gundersen, C. [Food insecurity and health outcomes](#). *Journal of Health Affairs*.

<sup>18</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Adult obesity](#).

<sup>19</sup> New Jersey Department of Health. [Complete Health Indicator Report of Obesity Among Adults](#).

<sup>20</sup> Laraia, B. A., Siega-Riz, A. M., & Gundersen, C. [Household food insecurity is associated with self-reported pre-gravid weight status, gestational weight gain, and pregnancy complications](#). *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*.

<sup>21</sup> Park, C. Y., & Eicher-Miller, H. A. Iron deficiency is associated with food insecurity in pregnant females in the United States: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999–2010. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

<sup>22</sup> Cook, J. T., & Frank, D. A. [Food security, poverty, and human development in the United States](#). *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.

<sup>23</sup> Seligman, H. K., & Berkowitz, S. A. [Aligning Programs and Policies to Support Food Security and Public Health Goals in the United States](#). *Annual Review of Public Health*.

<sup>24</sup> Jia, J., Fung, V., Meigs, J. B., & Thorndike, A. N. [Food Insecurity, Dietary Quality, and Health Care Utilization in Lower-Income Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study](#). *JAND*.

<sup>25</sup> Berkowitz SA, Basu S, Meigs JB, Seligman HK. [Food Insecurity and Health Care Expenditures in the United States, 2011-2013](#).

<sup>26</sup> Berkowitz SA, Basu S, Gundersen C. [State-Level and County-Level Estimates of Health Care Costs Associated with Food Insecurity](#).

# New Jersey Food Security Work Across Dimensions

## Food Desert Relief Program

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority's (NJEDA) [Food Desert Relief Program](#) was established by the Food Desert Relief Act in 2020.<sup>27</sup> Annually, this program provides \$40 million in tax credits, loans, grants, and/or technical assistance to increase access to nutritious food as well as develop strategies for alleviating food deserts.<sup>28</sup>

## Food Retail Innovation in Delivery Grant

The [Food Retail Innovation in Delivery Grant \(FRIDG\)](#) is administered by NJEDA. This grant subsidizes 30-50% of the costs associated with procurement and installation of temperature-controlled lockers, which supports expansion of food delivery options and increases food access for residents of defined food desert communities.<sup>29</sup>

## Child Nutrition Programs

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture administers the federal [child nutrition programs](#). These programs enable schools and childcare agencies to operate meal programs that provide nutritious meals daily.<sup>30</sup> Currently, over 700 school districts participate in these programs in New Jersey.<sup>31</sup> The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) administers the [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#), which provides nutrition and breastfeeding education, nutritious foods, and improved access to regular health care and social services to low and moderate-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding individuals and young children with, or at risk of developing nutrition-related health problems.<sup>32</sup>

## Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

The Department of Human Services (DHS) administers the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) program which provides food assistance to

families with low incomes to help them buy groceries through a benefits card accepted in most food retail stores and some farmers markets.<sup>33</sup> Participants in this program are eligible for a minimum monthly benefit amount of \$95.<sup>34</sup> In 2022, SNAP participants received \$2.58 billion in food benefits infused into local economies.

## Public Health & Food Protection Program

The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) [Public Health and Food Protection Program](#) protects the public through inspection of foods and communication to the public, retail food establishments, and local health departments about food and water safety policies and issues.<sup>35</sup>

## Home Visitation Nutrition Education

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families' (DCF) offers a variety of [home visitation programs](#).<sup>36</sup> The Department also recently implemented the [Family Connects NJ program](#). Through these programs, professionals visit the home during pregnancy and postpartum to engage with families to encourage positive behaviors and healthy nutrition to prevent poor pregnancy outcomes.<sup>37</sup>

## Combatting College Hunger

The 2019 Hunger-Free Campus Act is administered through the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE). Through the Act, a "Hunger-Free Campus" grant was established to combat food security among students at NJ public colleges and universities. OSHE has released the "[Enhancing New Jersey College Students' Access to Food, Housing, and Other Basic Needs Supports](#)" playbook in collaboration with The Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice. In addition, the NJ Office of Innovation also developed the College Support Resource Hub ([BasicNeeds.NJ.gov](#)); which acts as a central source of aggregated information college students can use when seeking support with meeting their basic needs.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>27</sup> NJEDA. [Rules for Food Desert Relief Tax Credit Program](#)

<sup>28</sup> NJEDA. [Food Desert Relief Program](#).

<sup>29</sup> New Jersey Economic Development Authority.

<sup>30</sup> NJ Department of Agriculture. [School Nutrition Programs](#).

<sup>31</sup> Assistant Secretary's Report to the NJ State Board of Agriculture.

<sup>32</sup> New Jersey Department of Health. [New Jersey WIC](#).

<sup>33</sup> New Jersey Department of Human Services. [NJ SNAP](#).

<sup>34</sup> NJ Department of Human Services. [Who is Eligible for SNAP?](#)

<sup>35</sup> NJDOH. [Public Health and Food Protection Program](#).

<sup>36</sup> NJ DCF. [FAQs for Pregnant Women and Families](#).

<sup>37</sup> NJ DCF. [Home Visitation Programs](#).

<sup>38</sup> Office of Innovation. [BasicNeeds.NJ.gov](#)