

WHEN HEALTHY FOOD IS OUT OF REACH: FOOD ACCESS SURVEY IN NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

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Page 2: Courtesy of Good Samaritan Food Pantry
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WHEN HEALTHY FOOD IS OUT OF REACH: FOOD ACCESS SURVEY OF NORTHWEST LOWER MICHIGAN

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a spring 2018 survey of food pantry users in Benzie and Antrim counties. The Food and Farming Network¹ and The Local Food Alliance² conducted the survey as part of their commitment to understanding the food system of Michigan's northwest Lower Peninsula. This survey was an opportunity to understand the experiences of pantry users in order to call attention to food access needs in these communities and inform network strategies. By focusing on the perspectives of people currently struggling to meet basic needs, survey findings can help identify ways the food system can better serve all community residents.

Benzie County

Benzie County, population just under 18,000,³ is located in northwest Lower Michigan alongside Lake Michigan. Benzie County is largely rural, with more than 50 inland lakes, two natural rivers, more than 10,000 acres of national park, and 59,000 acres of state land. There are several small towns in Benzie County; Frankfort, with a population of 1,300, is the largest.⁴ Two of the villages, Honor and Copemish, have small markets with limited fresh food. Frankfort and Benzonia have supermarkets with wider selections of fresh food and have

been working to source more local produce. The villages of Lake Ann, Thompsonville, and Beulah do not have any food markets. There are three farmers markets in Benzie County, though only one is open outside weekday business hours.

The surveys in Benzie County were conducted at the Benzie Area Christian Neighbors' food pantry. This pantry offers the opportunity to select foods twice a month. The site also offers a clothing center, financial assistance programs, and educational and job training opportunities, among other services.

1 The Food and Farming Network works to build northwest Michigan's agricultural future by identifying areas of need throughout the region's food system and coordinating action to address them. See: <https://foodandfarmingnetwork.com/>

2 The Local Food Alliance works to enrich the culture of local food and farming in northwest Lower Michigan. See: <https://www.facebook.com/LocalFoodAllianceOfNorthernMichigan/>

3 United States Census Bureau. (2013-2017). *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*. Population. Retrieved from: <https://factfinder.census.gov/>

4 Ibid.

Antrim County

Antrim County is also located in northwest Lower Michigan and also borders Lake Michigan. With a population of just over 23,000 people,⁵ Antrim is mostly rural with five villages and several smaller communities. The county is home to several supermarkets which are widely spaced throughout the county. For many people, the distance to grocery stores presents a barrier.

The surveys in Antrim County were conducted at Good Samaritan Food Pantry, which provides area families with food, assistance in emergency situations such as electricity shut-off or evictions, and referral services. The pantry is stocked with a large assortment of food items, including meats, dairy products, fruits, and vegetables. The pantry acquires donations of fruits and vegetables from local growers. Good Samaritan currently feeds approximately 2,000 people each month.⁶

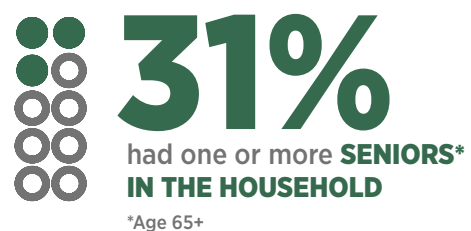
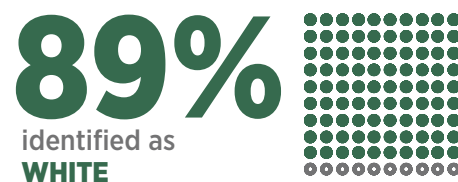
Who Took the Survey

The survey was conducted with a non-probability convenience sample of individuals at food pantries in Benzie and Antrim counties. Because the sample was not selected randomly from all residents in these counties, it is not representative of the Benzie and Antrim County populations as a whole. It is an oversampling of lower-income families since they were recruited at food pantries. The results of this survey cannot be used as the basis for general claims about the whole population. However, the purposive sampling strategy used in this survey allows us to better understand how low-income individuals strive to meet their food needs when resources are scarce. The survey findings are a window to the food access and challenges and opportunities that low-income individuals face.

In addition to the surveys, nine in-depth interviews took place at the same time and location as the surveys in order to gain more insight into specific individual's circumstances, access, and attitudes toward healthy food. The interviews took place in a separate space provided by both pantries and were conducted by Groundwork Center for Resilient

Communities staff. These interviews make clear what kinds of struggles low-income residents in Benzie and Antrim counties face when trying to access healthy food. The stories from these nine interviewees describe difficulties in balancing food costs with medical and childcare expenses, as well as the extra effort it sometimes takes to find transportation to places where healthy foods are distributed.

A total of 346 people completed the survey, including 201 from Antrim County and 145 from Benzie County. People taking the survey indicated living in more than 20 different zip codes. The largest concentrations of people came from zip code 49659 (17%, $n = 58$) around Mancelona in Antrim County, zip code 49727 (14%, $n = 48$) around East Jordan in Charlevoix County, and zip code 49683 (9%, $n = 31$) around Thompsonville in Benzie County.



⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Personal communication. Dave Kroon, Good Samaritan Food Pantry.

Women completing the survey (81%, $n = 277$) far outnumbered men (19%, $n = 65$) and transgender individuals (1%, $n = 2$). Most people who took the survey identified as white (89%, $n = 304$). Approximately 6% identified as Native American ($n = 22$), nearly 3% identified as Latinx ($n = 9$), and two people identified as black. The numbers of those who had children under 18 at home (48%, $n = 166$) and those who did not (52%, $n = 180$), split roughly evenly. Among those who had children at home, most reported between one and three kids (80%, $n = 133$). Nearly one third of people (31%, $n = 105$) had at least one household member age 65 or older (including the person completing the survey).

More than a third of people (38%, $n = 129$) indicated they were unemployed at the time of the survey. Many others were not in the labor force (32%, $n = 110$) or were employed part-time (18%, $n = 63$). Even though 81% ($n = 279$) of people responding to the survey were between the ages of 18 and 64, only 12% of people ($n = 41$) said they were working full time or more than full time. More than one fourth of people responding (26%, $n = 90$) indicated receiving disability benefits, which may explain some of the reasons for unemployment and underemployment. Most people in the survey described their overall

health as poor or fair (54%, $n = 185$). Only 30 people (9%) described their overall health as very good or excellent. Based on reported income and household size, the majority of people (67%, $n = 229$) were at or below the federal poverty line and nearly all people taking the survey (96%, $n = 330$) were at or below 150% of the poverty line.

Many of those who took the survey had trouble meeting basic needs. Approximately 15% ($n = 51$) of people who took the survey said that they had experienced a problem finding safe and comfortable shelter in the past 30 days, including 5% who frequently had difficulty finding shelter. Based on answers to a series of six questions about having enough food to eat, more than three fourths of people (78%, $n = 269$) responding to the survey indicated they were food insecure.⁷ More than half of those considered food insecure had a very low level of food security ($n = 144$) (or 42% of the total sample), meaning they frequently did not have enough food to eat. The level of food insecurity appeared to be slightly higher in Antrim County. Among Antrim County respondents in this survey, 46% ($n = 91$) reported very low food security. Among Benzie County respondents, 37% ($n = 53$) reported very low food security.

PRICE was by far the most important factor in deciding where to shop



⁷ The USDA 6-Item Household Food Security Survey Module was used to assess household food security status. Responses were scored using the USDA's mechanism, and participants were stratified into one of four categories: high food security, marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security.


Many people have difficulty meeting **BASIC NEEDS**

38%  were **UNEMPLOYED**

 **96%**
were at or below
**150% OF THE
THE POVERTY LINE**

15% 
did not have consistent
ACCESS TO HOUSING

 **78%**
reported being **FOOD INSECURE**
(low or very low food security)

42% 
reported **VERY LOW
FOOD SECURITY**

 **52%**
Reported having
**TO CHOOSE BETWEEN PAYING
FOR FOOD** and paying for
UTILITIES in the previous month

The survey also included a series of questions asking whether people had to make choices between paying for food and other household expenses, like medical care, gas for a car, or housing costs. Nearly 40% of people (39%, $n = 134$) had to make trade-offs between food and at least three other expenses in the previous month.⁸ The largest number of people had to choose between paying for food and paying for utilities in the previous month (52%, $n = 181$).

Where People Get Food and Why

The vast majority of people taking the survey (93%, $n = 321$) said they do most of the food shopping in their household. This means we can have a high degree of confidence in responses about where people get food and why.

People taking the survey were asked what three factors were most important to them when deciding where to shop for food. Prices, sales, or discounts were among the most important factors to the largest group people (69%, $n = 234$). Quality of food, ability to get everything in one place, and distance from home or work were all among the most important factors for roughly one third of people. While no one indicated that a locally owned store was among the most important factors in choosing where to shop for food, nearly one quarter of people said that Michigan-grown food was a top factor (24%, $n = 82$). Customer service; safety; foods that meet diet restrictions; foods from my culture; and organic, sustainable, or ethically raised products were among the most important factors for between 1% and 8% of people responding.

Survey results show patterns of where people get food most often. Responses from people who said they got food from a particular type of food outlet either “always” or “often” during the past month were tallied. From this analysis, we see that more than half of people taking the survey (58%, $n = 200$) said they frequently get food from a pantry. Dollar stores were the next most common category. Approximately half of people (49%, $n = 242$) said they frequently got food from a Dollar Store, outnumbering those frequenting large supermarkets and small grocery stores. On average, people reported frequenting four different types of food outlets in the past month.

⁸ Includes those who indicated that they or someone in their household choose between paying for food and paying for another expense either sometimes, often, or always.

In analyzing these findings, it is important to keep in mind what types of food outlets are available in different communities. Five people indicated there were no small grocery stores in their community (four in Antrim, one in Benzie), six people indicated there were no supermarkets (three in Antrim, three in Benzie), and 13 people (10 in Antrim, three in Benzie) indicated there were no warehouse stores. Five people indicated that neither a supermarket nor a warehouse store was available in their community (three in Antrim County and two in Benzie County). Everyone, however, indicated that farmers markets and dollar stores were available in their community.

The survey also included two questions on the convenience of pantry locations and operating hours. Approximately 23% of people ($n = 80$) indicated that the location of the pantry where they

completed the survey is inconvenient. A similar number (19%; $n = 64$) reported that the pantry times and days are inconvenient. Since people at the pantry in question gave these responses, it is likely that these figures underestimate the perceptions of inconvenience. We can expect that people who find the location and hours of a pantry inconvenient are less likely to visit that pantry, and therefore are less likely to be represented in this survey.

The survey also asked how many times during the preceding week a person had eaten at least one meal or snack prepared at a convenience store, at a fast food restaurant, or at a pizza restaurant. Results show that the majority ate meals or snacks from these food outlets on only one day or less in the past seven days: 78% ($n = 270$) from convenience stores, 82% ($n = 282$) from fast food restaurants, and 92% ($n = 317$) from pizza restaurants. A minority of people indicated eating snacks or meals on two to five days at convenience stores (19%, $n = 65$), at fast food restaurants (16%, $n = 55$), and at pizza restaurants (7%, $n = 23$). Several interviewees revealed in conversation that they work at convenience stores or fast food restaurants and therefore eat at these venues regularly. Among those interviewed, between 2-3% of people ate snacks or meals from these venues every day in the preceding week.

“Yeah well, I have Priority Health, and I have Medicaid but Medicaid doesn't pay for your medicine until you're 62, and it's a lot, sometimes like \$250 a month. . . Yeah my husband works overtime to pay for it because it's a big expense.”

— Benzie County resident

More people regularly got **FOOD FROM A DOLLAR STORE** than a supermarket

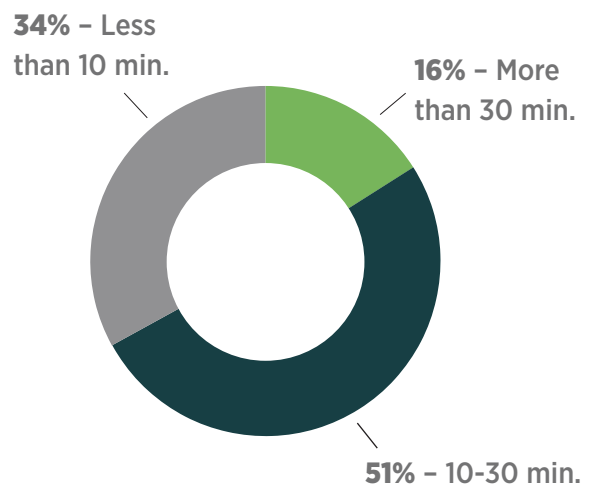


Transportation

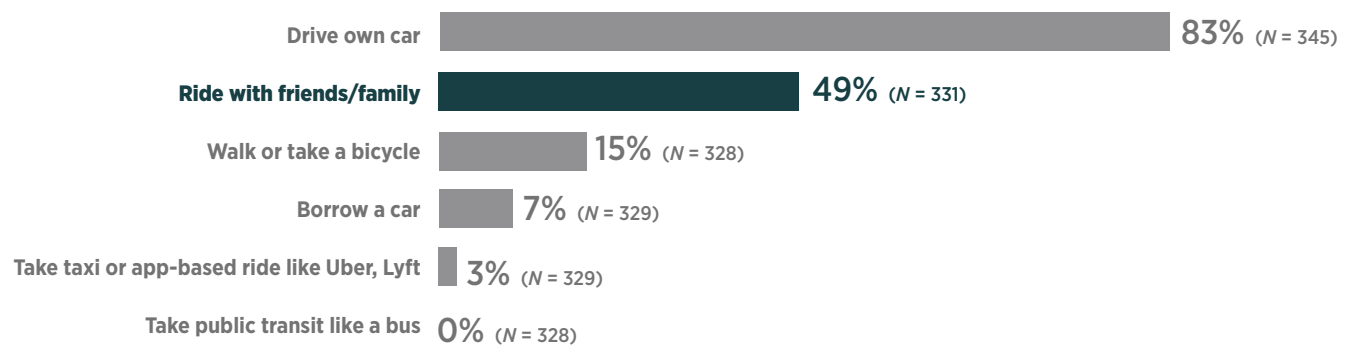
When asked about how many minutes they usually travel for groceries, the majority of people indicated traveling less than 30 minutes (84%, $n = 285$). However, 55 individuals (16%) indicated they usually travel more than 30 minutes, including 17 people (5%) who said they travel more than 45 minutes. In Benzie County, 12% ($n = 17$) of people indicated traveling more than 30 minutes whereas in Antrim County, nearly one fifth (19%, $n = 38$) of people indicated traveling more than 30 minutes.

Traveling by car was by far the most common mode of transportation. A majority of people indicated driving their own car, but almost half relied on rides from family or friends in order to reach groceries.

16% traveled **MORE THAN 30 MINUTES** to buy food



HALF OF PEOPLE rely on rides from friends and family



Indications of Access

Across all survey respondents, the majority reported eating well below the recommended levels of fruits and vegetables — 76% indicated eating 2 cups or less of fruit each day and 66% indicated eating 2 cups or less of vegetables each day. This is consistent with findings for Michigan residents more broadly. In 2015, only 14.4% of Michigan adults reported consuming fruits and vegetables five or more times per day.⁹

Even within this context of low average consumption levels of fruits and vegetables, it appears that

poverty status may be related to consumption levels. Among those who reported eating 2 cups or less of vegetables each day, 71% were at or below 100% of the federal poverty line, compared with 29% who were above 100% of the poverty line.

When people surveyed were asked about barriers to eating fruits and vegetables directly, cost emerged as the most significant self-reported challenge. Importantly, among those who reported consuming 2 cups or less of fruit a day ($n = 247$), a substantially greater proportion reported who they perceived cost as a barrier in eating enough fruits and

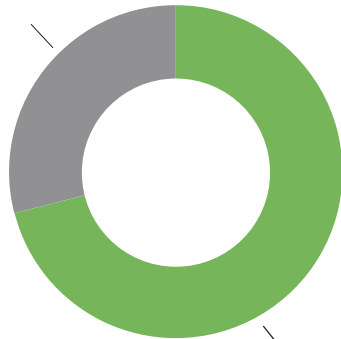
⁹ Fussman C. (2017). Health Risk Behaviors within the State of Michigan: 2015 *Behavioral Risk Factor Survey*, 29th Annual Report. Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Lifecourse Epidemiology and Genomics Division. Available from: https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdhhs/2015_MiBRES_Annual_Report_FINAL_578283_7.pdf

People eating **2 CUPS OR LESS** of fruits and vegetable per day were more likely to be at or below the poverty line

2 CUPS OR LESS OF VEGETABLES (n = 277)



29% - above 100% of poverty line



71% - at or below 100% of poverty line

2 CUPS OR LESS OF FRUIT (n = 247)



33% - above 100% of poverty line



67% - at or below 100% of poverty line

vegetables (61% vs. 39%). The same relationship was seen with vegetable consumption — among those who reported consuming 2 cups or less of vegetables a day (n = 227), a larger portion reported that cost was a barrier (62% vs. 38%).

Approximately 20% of people indicated two or more barriers to eating fruits and vegetables. However, nearly one quarter of people taking the survey indicated they did not experience barriers to eating fruits and vegetables. A larger proportion of those who reported experiencing no barriers to eating enough fruits and vegetables reported consuming 2-3 cups of fruit a day or more compared to those that reported experiencing one or more barriers (36% vs. 20%, n = 77).

"Fruits and vegetables are not taken care of in store. They look rotten."

— Antrim County resident

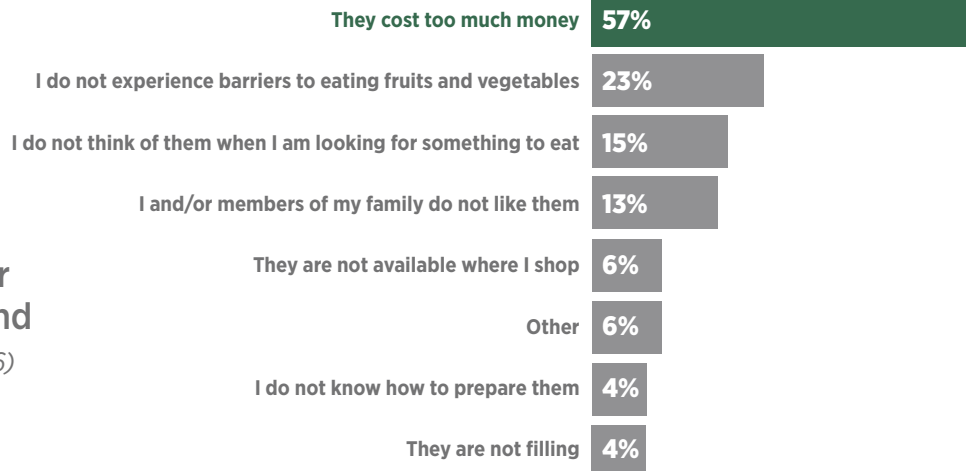
"I make sure there is enough for my kids to have and I go without."

— Antrim County resident

The availability of high quality fruits and vegetables also appears to be a challenge for some people. More than one fourth of people responding (27%; n = 73) indicated that it was not easy to find high quality fresh fruits and vegetables where they live.¹⁰ A similar number of people (26%; n = 75) reported that they do not have easy access to stores that meet their needs. Of those reporting inadequate access to stores that meet their needs, about half (56%, n = 41) reported traveling 20 minutes or more for grocery shopping, including about a third (32%, n = 23) who reported traveling 30 minutes or more. Likewise, of those indicating it was not easy to find high quality fresh fruits and vegetables, 49% (n = 35) reported traveling at least 20 minutes, including 18% (n = 13) who reported traveling at least 30 minutes for grocery shopping.

¹⁰ This calculation excludes responses from people who said they did not know or had no opinion.

COST is the most significant barrier to eating fruits and vegetables (N = 346)



Interest in Local Food

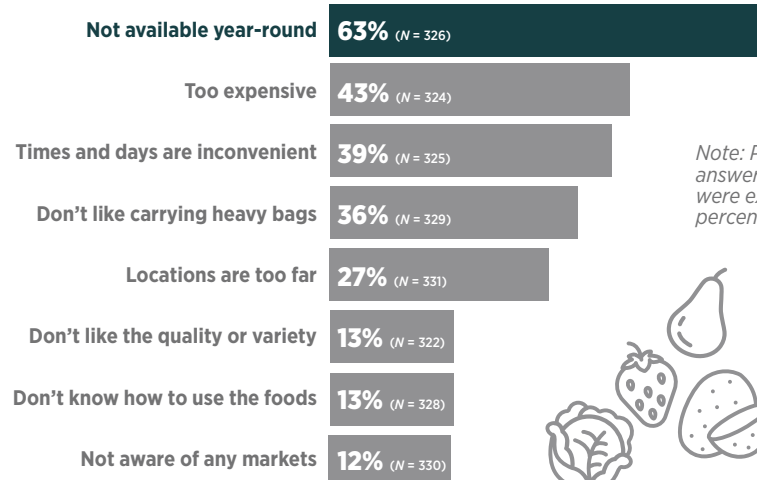
Less than one fourth of people answering the survey included Michigan-grown foods as one of the top factors in deciding where to grocery shop (24%, n = 82). However, most people (72%, n = 240) said they were interested in knowing which of the foods they eat are grown or produced in Michigan. A majority (67%, n = 228) also stated that they look for locally grown food when grocery shopping. Similarly, the majority (59%, n = 197) said they were concerned about whether the food they eat comes from nearby or far away. Nearly as many (57%, n = 186) indicated an interest in gardening in their spare time.

About 23% of people in this sample indicated getting groceries from farmers markets (see p. 7).

The substantial number of people reporting barriers to shopping at farmers markets may indicate why farmers market shopping was not more common. Lack of year-round availability, lack of affordability, inconvenient hours, and dislike for carrying heavy bags were all barriers indicated by one third or more of people responding to the survey.

The survey also gathered insights about individuals' experiences with local food at pantries. Most people agreed that the pantries tried to offer food grown by local farmers (83%, n = 275). Even more indicated appreciating having locally grown food when it is available at the pantries (93%, n = 319). Few people reported disliking the quality or variety of local foods offered (11%, n = 37) or not knowing how to use the local foods offered (10%, n = 35).

LIMITED SEASONALITY of farmers markets reported as biggest barrier



Note: People who answered "I don't know" were excluded from the percentage calculations.



Conclusions

The survey findings clearly show that many food pantry users in Antrim and Benzie counties face multiple struggles to meet basic needs. The compounding effects of unemployment and under-employment, high rates of food insecurity, and health challenges were prevalent. Respondents reported that choosing between food and other expenses occurs frequently. Almost everyone was at or below 150% of the poverty line. In this context, it will be crucial for food access initiatives to address these multiple and intersecting needs comprehensively.

Prices are the primary driving motivation for choosing where to buy food. Dollar stores are a common choice for grocery shopping (about half of people said they frequent dollar stores), even surpassing supermarkets as the most visited store type. Meals at fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and pizza restaurants are at least a weekly choice for about half of people responding.

While the availability of stores and the quality of store offerings is not an issue for the majority of people represented here, a substantial minority are dissatisfied with the quality of produce at nearby stores and unhappy with their ability to access stores that meet their needs. The distance to stores and access to transportation are important factors in this equation. Approximately 16% of people reported traveling over 30 minutes to buy food and almost half relied on rides from family or friends in order to reach groceries. People reporting inadequate access to food that meets their needs were more likely to be traveling at least 30 minutes to reach a grocery store.

However, the bigger barrier for more people appears to be the cost of food. For many of the people represented in these findings, food prices appear to impact the ability to choose the foods they would like. More than half of people find that fruits and vegetables are too expensive, which likely limits how much produce they eat.

Interest in Michigan-grown foods is high in this sample: substantial majorities indicated wanting to know whether their food is from Michigan and appreciating having local foods available at pantries. However, the perception that farmers markets are too expensive was also common. The lack of year-round availability of farmers markets was also reported as a barrier for the majority of people in this survey. On the other hand, few people reported not knowing how to prepare the fruits and vegetables sold at farmers markets or offered at pantries.

Pantries are helping bridge gaps in food needs for many of the people represented in this survey. However, approximately one fifth of people indicated that pantries' locations, days, and times are inconvenient. This is likely to be an underestimate given that the survey was only conducted with people who were present at a pantry.



Key Recommendations

The findings presented here point to at least six recommendations of strategies to increase access to healthy food and better understanding of current limiting factors.

1. Conduct focus groups or interviews to better understand why the limited seasonality of farmers markets is a barrier.

Well over half of people in this survey agreed that the lack of year-round availability is a barrier to shopping at farmers markets. It is not clear from the data, however, why this is seen as a barrier. Is it hard to remember when farmers markets are or are not open? Is it hard not knowing what products will be available at different times of the year? Would tips on eating seasonally be helpful? Focus groups or interviews on this topic could provide further insights.

2. Consider increasing pantry days and hours.

The number of people reporting pantry days, times, and locations as inconvenient indicates that a review of pantry accessibility in the area would be helpful. If feasible, consider extending operating hours and/or offering satellite locations.

3. Increase healthy food choices at dollar stores

Approximately half of people in this sample reported regularly shopping at dollar stores. Dollar store executives target rural areas and people with low incomes; and dollar stores often contribute to the closure of supermarkets in the area by undercutting prices.¹¹ Typically, dollar stores carry little to no fresh produce and only a limited amount of processed food, packaged in order to hit a low price point.¹² There are several dollar stores in both Benzie and Antrim counties and there could be opportunities to encourage dollar store owners to stock healthy food choices.

4. Offer benefit programs at farmers markets.

Many people reported that food at farmers markets is too expensive. Offering and promoting benefit programs at farmers market could reduce this barrier and expand access to fresh produce. Currently there are markets in both Benzie and Antrim counties that accept SNAP, Double Up Food Bucks, Project Fresh, and WIC.

5. Offer and promote Double Up Food Bucks at grocery stores.

Many people in this survey indicated interest in Michigan-grown foods. The Double Up Food Bucks program could help make Michigan-grown items more affordable.

6. Explore local transportation options.

Large numbers of people in this survey are relying on rides from friends or family members to reach grocery stores. And substantial numbers of people are traveling more than 30 minutes to reach food retail outlets. Efforts to expand public transportation in these counties should include considerations of access to food outlets.



¹¹ Donahue, M. (2018). Dollar Store Impacts. Institute for Local Self-Reliance. Available from: https://ilsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Dollar_Store_Fact_Sheet.pdf

¹² Ibid

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