Food Access and Insecurity in St. Louis Park

Results from a Local Food Access Assessment

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About the study

In 2018, the City of St. Louis Park (the city) was approached by local advocates encouraging the city to do more to address food access and insecurity in the community. The City Council determined that the first step in doing so was to understand to what extent residents in the community experienced food insecurity and lack of access to nutritious and affordable food. In 2019, the city contracted with Wilder Research to complete a community needs assessment about food access and insecurity. Wilder Research worked with city staff to develop an evaluation plan to answer the following research questions:

- What are the factors and issues that impact food access and security among St. Louis Park residents?
- What resources and services exist to support food security in St. Louis Park?
- Where are gaps in food access and related services that residents experience?
- What role can the city of St. Louis Park have in supporting greater food access and security for residents?

To provide a more complete picture of the landscape of food access and insecurity in the city, a multi-method evaluation approach was used, including:

- GIS mapping showing the locations of grocery stores, convenience stores, food programs, community gardens, affordable housing, transit lines, and demographic characteristics of residents
- A review of existing datasets to provide population-level data about demographics and factors impacting food access and security in St. Louis Park
- Key informant interviews with 19 community stakeholders with experience working around issues related to food access or with populations likely to be impacted by food insecurity
- Three focus groups with a total of 31 residents representing groups most likely to be impacted by food insecurity, including residents of an affordable housing complex, food shelf clients, and parents in a supportive housing program
- A survey of participants in a youth program to better understand the food access needs of young people, especially during times when school is not in session
- A review of literature about promising approaches to addressing food access and insecurity, with a focus on city-level policies and strategies
- A review of other documents, including city planning documents and websites and related materials from existing St. Louis Park programs

A full description of the methods and the survey results can be found in the appendix.

Results from this assessment will be used by city staff and the City Council to inform any next steps to better understand and address food access and insecurity among St. Louis Park residents.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the data collection approaches. The number of residents who experience food insecurity is difficult to estimate, as there is not an existing data source with that information available at the city- or neighborhood-level. The study includes measures of reach reported by local food programs and describes residents who may be more likely to experience food insecurity because of economic factors or reliance on public transportation.

Wilder Research worked closely with staff from the city to determine how to prioritize data collection activities within the available study budget. Through the key informant interviews and focus groups, a wide range of perspectives were brought into the study, including from individuals experiencing food insecurity. While the themes that emerged from these discussions provide the city with important information, they may not fully describe the needs and interests of all residents experiencing food insecurity. In particular, despite multiple attempts to partner with local agencies to recruit participants, we were unsuccessful in organizing focus groups with immigrant and refugee communities within the study timeframe. In addition, because most of focus group participants were women (93%) and many were parents, the perspectives and experiences of men, transgender or gender- fluid individuals, and single-person households may not be fully represented.

The strategies listed in the report are options identified by community residents and key stakeholders to address barriers to accessing healthy, affordable food. They were identified as promising approaches, but should not be understood as a finite list of options for the city to select from. Additional strategies may emerge through further engagement with community residents and local stakeholders who are deeply involved in addressing food insecurity in St. Louis Park.

Finally, this report is not a feasibility study, nor does it provide information about the costs or time required to implement the strategies. The research questions that guided this study focused on understanding food access needs, barriers, and resources in the community, and identifying strategies to further increase access to healthy, affordable food. It provides a foundation for deeper exploration of potential strategies by the city and its partners.

Background

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), nearly 9% of Minnesota households experienced food insecurity between 2016-2018 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2019a). In this study, food security is defined as having reliable and sufficient amounts of safe, nutritious food. Individuals and families who experience food insecurity may worry that not all members in a household will have enough to eat with the resources available, or will eat smaller and less nutritionally-balanced meals when resources are limited. Food insecurity is influenced by the availability of food in a community, as well as individuals' abilities to access it. While food insecurity is closely tied to poverty, it is also affected by other social issues including transportation, low wages, costs of housing and health care, and availability of grocery stores. Food insecurity can impact families at multiple income levels, and not all families experiencing poverty report being food insecure.

Measures of food insecurity

To understand the experiences of individuals and families, it can be helpful to think of food security as a continuum. Food insecurity can be experienced as a worry about not having enough food, small modifications in the size or nutritional quality of meals when resources are stretched thin, or – when most severe – hunger or weight loss because there is not enough food to eat. The USDA defines four degrees of food security (USDA Economic Research Service, 2019):

- High food security: Households had no problems or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food.
- Marginal food security: Households had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.
- Low food security: Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- Very low food security: At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

Food access is defined in this study as the extent to which nutritious, affordable food is at a manageable distance and easy to get to using personal or public transportation. In neighborhoods with fewer grocery stores or food outlets, the cost of food and availability of transportation can be barriers to accessing nutritious, affordable food (Bonanno & Li, 2015). Food access can also be limited when available foods are poor quality or when families are unable to access public program benefits or other food resources.

In many communities, improving the availability and accessibility of healthy food is part of a more holistic strategy to strengthen the local food system. A **sustainable food system** is one that considers how the multiple interconnected systems that support the production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food are enhanced to best benefit the community. When planning a strategy to increase food access, it is helpful to consider the potential change in the context of the local food system. For example, multiple approaches can be used to increase the amount of fresh produce available to residents at food shelves as a strategy for addressing local food affordability and accessibility challenges. To ensure that changes in the types of food available at the food shelf are sustainable and most beneficial to the community, a broad range of complementary activities may be considered, including: requiring changes in donation policies to secure healthy food; creating new programming to help customers develop new cooking skills; investing in food storage equipment at the food shelf; increasing transportation options to help residents get to the food shelf location; engaging with community residents to understand food preferences and increase demand for fresh produce; establishing partnerships with local growers; and developing a feasible approach to compost additional food waste at the food shelf.

It is important to recognize that while there is no single strategy for guaranteed success, there are many opportunities to reduce food insecurity in St. Louis Park. Creative approaches can draw on effective practices in other communities, while making adaptations to address local needs and align with community interests, be feasible for involved partners, and align with the resources and programs available in the community.

Food security in Minnesota

Although Minnesota has one of the lowest rates of food insecurity in the nation, 8.6% of households in Minnesota experienced food insecurity in 2018. Nationally, 11.7% of households experience food insecurity, with state estimates ranging from 8.0% in Hawaii to 15.9% in New Mexico (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2019). Across the state, rural residents, low-income residents, older adults, and residents of color are most likely to lack access to healthy foods (Mattessich & Rausch, 2016).

Food insecurity has been declining since its peak during the recession in Minnesota and nationally. This may be impacted both by an improving economy and greater use of local food support resources. During that same time period, food shelf use in Minnesota has continued to rise, with residents visiting food shelves 3.4 million times in 2017, the highest rate on record, and the seventh year in a row with over 3 million visits (Hunger Solutions, 2018a). In Minnesota, older adults are also the fastest growing group of food shelf users, with food shelf visits among older adults increasing 39.3% between 2012 and 2018 (Hunger Solutions, 2018b).

Federal and state policy context

On a national level, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has been one of the key policies in place to reduce food insecurity. The program provides lower-income families with money that can be used towards groceries in grocery stores and in some convenience stores and farmers markets. Under the current federal administration, there have been proposals to reduce funding or limit program eligibility, such as adding work requirements or making changes in how assets and support from other benefit programs are considered. No changes were made to the SNAP program in the 2019 federal farm bill. Currently, a rule proposed by the United States Department of Agriculture would limit SNAP eligibility only to families that receive support from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which would result in 15% of households in Minnesota losing SNAP benefits (Mathematica, n.d.).

Some state and federal policies developed to address food access have focused on allocating resources to areas designated as food deserts. The USDA defines food deserts in urban areas as low-income census tracts (poverty rate is 20% or greater) where at least one-third of residents live half a mile or more from a grocery store. Although this definition is used for some funding and policy decisions, these geographically defined distinctions have limitations both in overestimating food insecurity among residents who live in these areas and missing individuals experiencing food insecurity in areas where grocery stores are present (Ver Ploeg, Dutko & Breneman, 2015).

In Minnesota, multiple state agencies have roles in addressing food security. For example, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture administers grant programs to help small businesses have the equipment needed to store fresh food and produce and to support programs that bring local foods into schools, child care centers, and other institutions as administrators of public benefit programs. The Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP), administered by local public health departments with funding from the Minnesota Department of Health, has increased awareness and adoption of promising strategies to increase access to healthy food. The activities they encourage are wide-ranging and include developing farmers markets and food shelves, establishing food policy councils, and enhancing local food distribution systems (Minnesota Department of Health, 2018a).

With federal cuts to food programs, cities and other municipalities have increasingly taken on strategies to increase access to healthy foods and reduce food insecurity. These strategies have included prioritizing healthy food access in comprehensive planning processes and supporting the expansion of healthy food retail options, urban agriculture, and transportation.

Study results

Who is most impacted by food insecurity and lower food access in St. Louis Park?

Demographic characteristics of St. Louis Park residents

To understand who is most impacted by food insecurity in the community, it is helpful to consider the demographic characteristics of the population overall. St. Louis Park is a growing community with a current population of 48,920 residents, an 8% increase in the population since 2010. While the majority of St. Louis Park residents are white (81%), the community is becoming more culturally diverse (Figure 1). Since 2000, the percentage of Black/African American residents has increase from 4% to 8% of the population, while the percentage of residents who identify as Asian (4%) or Hispanic (4%) has remained relatively consistent (City of St. Louis Park, 2019). English is the primary language spoken in most households (88%), with Spanish being the second most common language spoken at home (4%). Eleven percent of residents were born in a foreign county (American Community Survey, 2013-17).

1. Race and ethnicity of St. Louis Park residents

Race and ethnicity	%
White/Caucasian	81%
Black/African-American	8%
Hispanic/Latino	4%
Asian-American or Pacific Islander	4%
Two or more races	3%
American-Indian or Alaskan Native	Suppressed
Other	Suppressed

Source: American Community Survey 2013-2017, accessed through MN Compass

Note: Data are suppressed when the number of residents in a demographic group are too few to calculate reliable city-level estimates.

The median age of St. Louis Park residents is 35.6, very similar to the median age in Hennepin County, and has stayed largely the stayed largely the same since 2000 (Minnesota Compass, n.d.). Since 2010, the city has seen growth in the percentage of young seniors (age 60-69), working age adults (age 35-44), and school age children (age 5-19; City of St. Louis Park, 2019). Currently, 18% of St. Louis Park residents are children under the age of 18, and 14% of residents are 65 years of age or older (Minnesota Compass, n.d.).

The city's 2040 Comprehensive Plan (2019) describes significant racial disparities in household income among St. Louis Park residents. Overall, the median household income for St. Louis Park residents is similar to the state average. However, the median household income for white residents ($74,928) is somewhat higher than for Latino ($70,938) and Asian ($61,902) residents, and over twice as high as the average income for Black/African American residents ($30,254). These differences in income levels are important context in this study, as food insecurity is closely associated with financial stability.

Food insecurity in St. Louis Park

Food insecurity is a problem impacting some St. Louis Park residents. There is not a data source that offers a precise number of St. Louis Park residents experiencing food insecurity, but local data sources do provide some rough estimates. According to the 2018 Hennepin County SHAPE Survey, 12% of residents in St. Louis Park and Hopkins "sometimes" or "often" worry that they will run out of food before having money to buy more (with 11% saying it is "rarely" an issue and or 77% reporting it is "never" an issue).[1] Six percent of St. Louis Park ninth grade students reported missing one or more meals because their family did not have enough money to buy food according to the Minnesota Student Survey (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Likewise, 6.0% of St. Louis Park households, or about 1,400 households, received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2018 (SNAP) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

Food insecurity may be a "hidden" or "silent" issue in St. Louis Park. More than one-third of key informants commented that food insecurity was a "silent" or "hidden" issue in St. Louis Park, with some noting the food needs of children and older adults, in particular, as going unnoticed. The informants reflected that food insecurity is not always going without food, but about having to stretch resources to make ends meet and having fewer choices in getting food that is affordable, fresh, nutritious, and easily accessible.

> *"We have a half million kids in Minnesota struggling with food security - a staggering number… You don't see so many [homeless people] on the streets as we do in San Francisco, but we don't think of ourselves in that way. We think we have it solved to a great extent because we have food shelves and other programs. It is a bit invisible, especially with kids." – key informant*

[1] The SHAPE survey is administered to a representative sample of residents and weighted to establish estimates for a larger population. The sampling methodology used by Hennepin County allows for estimates to be made for St. Louis Park and Hopkins residents combined, but cannot be used to determine the prevalence of food insecurity for St. Louis Park residents alone.

> *"Like many things associated with poverty, it's very hidden. It's not something that is openly talked about generally, the need for food. It's something that is hard to see and understand. Because we're providing for the need, we see it firsthand here. People do share their struggle with us that they're not sharing with others. It looks like people quietly not being able to access full choices they want and that meet their health needs."– key informant*
>
> *"I'm not sure people really see or think that kids go hungry in St. Louis Park." – key informant*

Specific populations impacted by food insecurity

Local survey data and feedback from key informants study suggests four populations may be particularly impacted by food insecurity and lower food access: children; older adults; households living near or below the poverty line; and immigrant communities.

Children

About one in three children in St. Louis Park are eligible for free and reduced price lunch. According to the most recent data from the Minnesota Student Survey, 30% of ninth grade students report they receive free or reduce priced lunches, which is available for students living in low-income households (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Although the school food programs may meet many of the needs of food-insecure families, one key informant noted that there has been a growing problem of school lunch debt in the community. In the survey, some youth reported skipping meals during the school year, with reasons being that they did not have money or did not qualify for free lunch, the food was unappealing, they were not hungry, or the lunch hour was too short. Key informants and parents living in the supportive housing program reported challenges making sure there was enough to eat when school was not in session (e.g., during summer months or on the weekends).

Some parents and children in St. Louis Park report not having enough to eat. As noted above, 6% of St. Louis Park ninth grade students reported missing one or more meals because their family did not have enough money to buy food according to the Minnesota Student Survey (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Among parents who participated in the focus group held at the supportive housing program, many were worried about running out of food before having money to purchase more. In addition, some of the youth surveyed reported that they worried about food running out.

> *"Say you have a budget of $300 [for food]. You can only go [to the grocery store] maybe two or three times." – focus group participant*
>
> *"When you don't have much money or [food] stamps and you're running really low on food, how can you get to these places [that sell low-cost food]?" – focus group participant*

Children under 18 make up a large percentage of those benefitting from the food shelf. Approximately half of the households served by STEP, a St. Louis Park food shelf, have children. STEP serves approximately 16% of children under the age of 18 in St. Louis Park (J. Lapointe, personal communication, November 25, 2019).

Older adults

Older adults also experience food insecurity, but may be less likely to seek out help. Eight percent of St. Louis Park residents 65 years or older live below the federal poverty line, which is similar to the St. Louis Park population overall that lives below the poverty line (7%, Minnesota Compass (n.d.)) One third of older adults (35%) have a disability, which could impact mobility and food access (Minnesota Compass, n.d.). Adults 65 and older make up 9% of the population STEP serves, which is somewhat lower than the percentage of older adults in St. Louis Park overall (13%; J. Lapointe, personal communication, November 25, 2019; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). Key informants suggested that food insecurity among this population may be especially hidden because older adults may have limited mobility to get to services or may feel shame about asking for help. They also noted that women may be more likely to be impacted, because of differences in workforce participation and gender-based pay gaps affecting retirement savings and benefits, and that the older adult population overall will continue to grow.

> *"There are so many seniors who don't drive and can't get to the food shelf let alone navigate home with food." – key informant*
>
> *"Because I spend a lot of time with seniors, another barrier is stigma - the stigma of applying for food stamps or going to a food shelf. I can't tell you how many times I've had people sit in the office and just cry about the fact that they never thought they'd end up in this situation… I talk to seniors who are eligible but they…remember when there was stigma of being "on the county" and what that meant and how people were looked down upon." – key informant*
>
> *"[Older women] are less likely to have pensions or [the] level of social security from years of work than men are likely to have. They're less likely to have the income stream from savings that men accumulate in their lifetime, and they're living longer than men in general." – key informant*

Lower-income households

Residents living in lower-income households may be particularly susceptible to food insecurity. Eighteen percent of St. Louis Park residents have an annual household income below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), an estimate of financial instability and threshold used for some public benefit programs.[2] This compares to 11% in Edina, 16%

[2] The federal poverty level (FPL) considers household size. In 2019, 200% FPL is $24,980 for a single household and $51,500 for a family of four.

in Golden Valley, 37% in Hopkins, and 38% in Minneapolis. Seven percent of residents have an annual household income below 100% FPL. STEP generally serves residents with the lowest incomes; 85% of people receiving assistance from the program across service areas report income at or below 100% of the federal poverty level (J. Lapointe, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Many of the focus group participants from both the food shelf and affordable housing building reported running out of food before having money to buy more. Key informants also suggested that families who have incomes just above eligibility requirements for different benefits programs may experience food insecurity and have more difficulty accessing services.

> *"One of the barriers is the county programs available have the income limits - unfortunately the families that are working make just a little too much to qualify but not quite enough to meet their needs." – key informant*

Food insecurity does not only impact residents at the lowest income levels. St. Louis Park residents with higher incomes may experience economic instability as a result of high housing costs, inconsistent employment, or other expenses (e.g. child care, medical bills). These issues, which can lead to difficulty accessing healthy, affordable foods, are further described in later sections of the report.

Immigrant communities

Immigrant communities, especially Latino, African, and Eastern European, may be growing groups likely to be impacted by food insecurity. Eleven percent of St. Louis Park residents are foreign-born (compared to 8% in Golden Valley, 12% in Edina, 16% in Minneapolis, and 23% in Hopkins; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). A representative from the food shelf noted they serve a significant Latino population, with 26 percent of those they serve identifying as Latino. They also reported a small but growing African immigrant population accessing the food shelf, as well as an increase in resident from Russia and other Eastern European countries. Demographics of food shelf users also suggest that people of color, particularly African American and Latino residents, may be disproportionately impacted by food insecurity in the community.

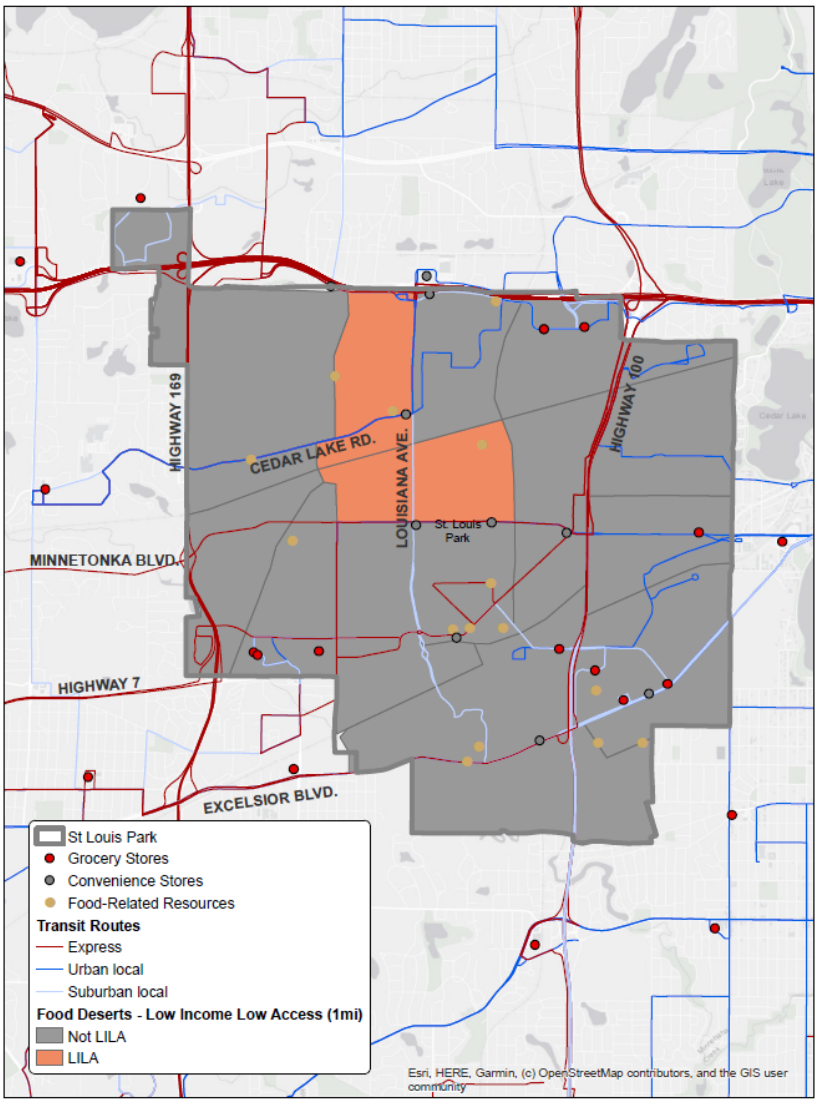
Geographic areas

St. Louis Park has two federally designated food deserts in the north central region of the city. The USDA defines food deserts as census tracts that are low-income (defined as areas where the poverty rate is 20 percent or greater, or the median family income is less than 80 percent of the metro region) and low food access (defined as at least 500 people or 33% of the population who live more than one mile from a supermarket or grocery store). Using this designation, there are two census tracts (221.02 and 224) that qualify as food

deserts in the north central region of the city (Figure 2). A third census tract (222) that includes the northwest corner of the city (north of Minnetonka Avenue and extended to the west city limits) is also federally defined as a low-access area.

The food desert definition is used by some federal programs when allocating resources or determining eligibility for grants, but it is an imperfect measure of food access. Another way of understanding food access is in looking at proximity to grocery stores, both directly and via public transit routes. Some residents of the following neighborhoods live in areas more than one mile from grocery stores in St. Louis Park: Aquila (northern area of neighborhood), Bronx Park, Oak Park Hill (northern area of neighborhood) Texa Tonka, and Willow Park. As described in more detail in the discussion of public transit, residents in these neighborhoods may lack public transit options, particularly in evenings and on weekends.

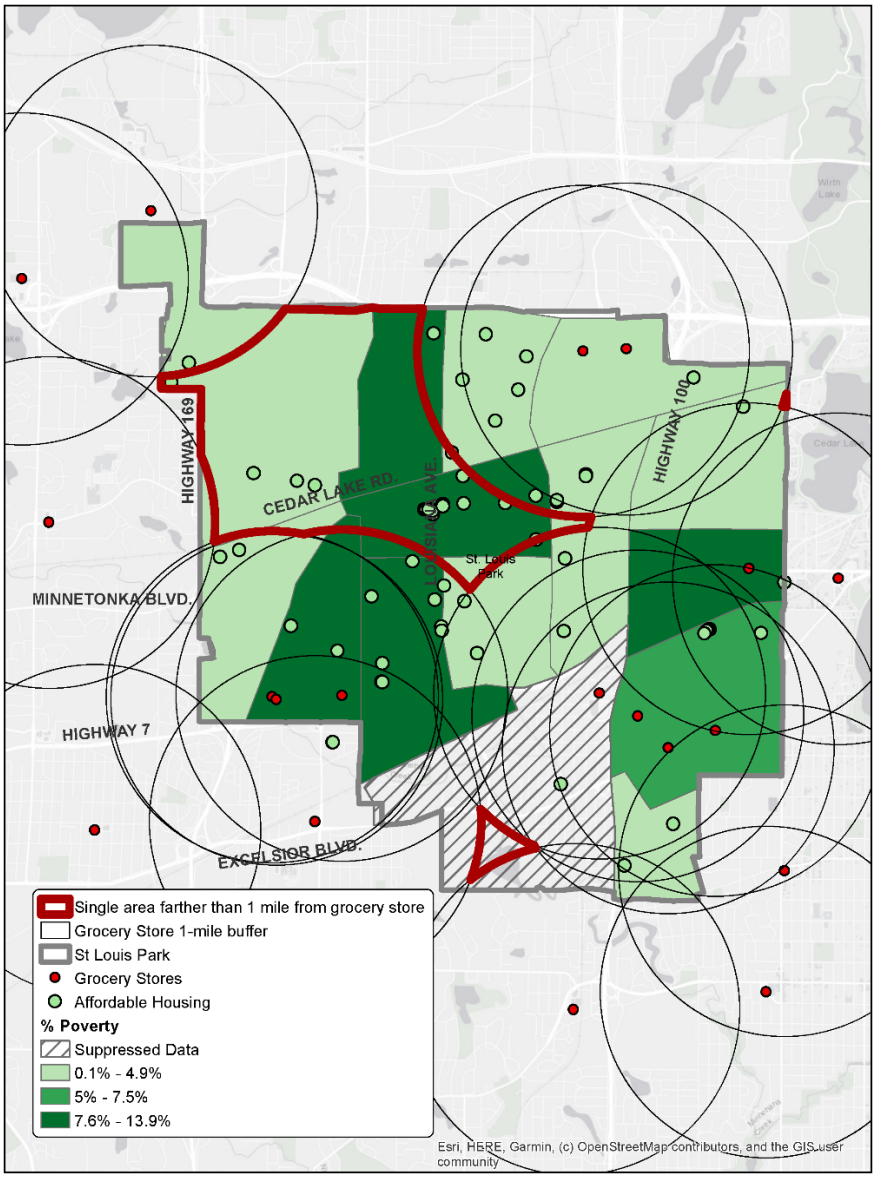
2. Map of federally designated food deserts (showing all the food locations and transit routes)



According to data from 2010 Census, the most recent data available, St. Louis Park residents who live in census blocks more than one mile from a grocery store have demographic characteristics similar to the city population overall. Fourteen percent of these are 65 or older. Eighty-three percent are white, 6% identify as black/African American, 4% as Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 4% as Hispanic/Latino, fewer than 1% identify as American Indian, and 3% identify as multi-racial or another race.

The neighborhoods identified as being further away from grocery stores are lower- income areas of the city (Figure 3). These neighborhoods have higher levels of poverty and are also where a number of public housing buildings are located.

3. Map showing one-mile radius of grocery stores, poverty levels, and locations of affordable housing



What resources exist to support food security and access in St. Louis Park?

Overall, the city has a number of retail options such as grocery stores and convenience stores, and food access programs such as food shelves, community gardens, and other programs that increase access to healthy foods. However, not all resources are known or readily accessible to all residents.

Grocery stores

St. Louis Park has a higher number of grocery stores per capita than surrounding communities. There are 10 grocery stores in St. Louis Park, including stores with lower price points (Aldi and Cub Foods) (Figure 4). In comparison, Edina, which has a somewhat larger number of residents, has six. Golden Valley and Hopkins, cities with populations less than half the size of St. Louis Park, each have one grocery store. Most of the grocery stores in the city are located along four major streets: Highway 100 (Target, Lunds & Byerlys), 36th Street West (Aldi, Super Target, and Cub Foods), Excelsior Boulevard (Fresh Thyme, Trader Joe's), and West End (Costco, Cub Foods).

While there are public transit routes along these streets, weekend hours are limited and there are no feeder lines extending into most residential neighborhoods. There are also several grocery stores just outside city limits (Figure 4).

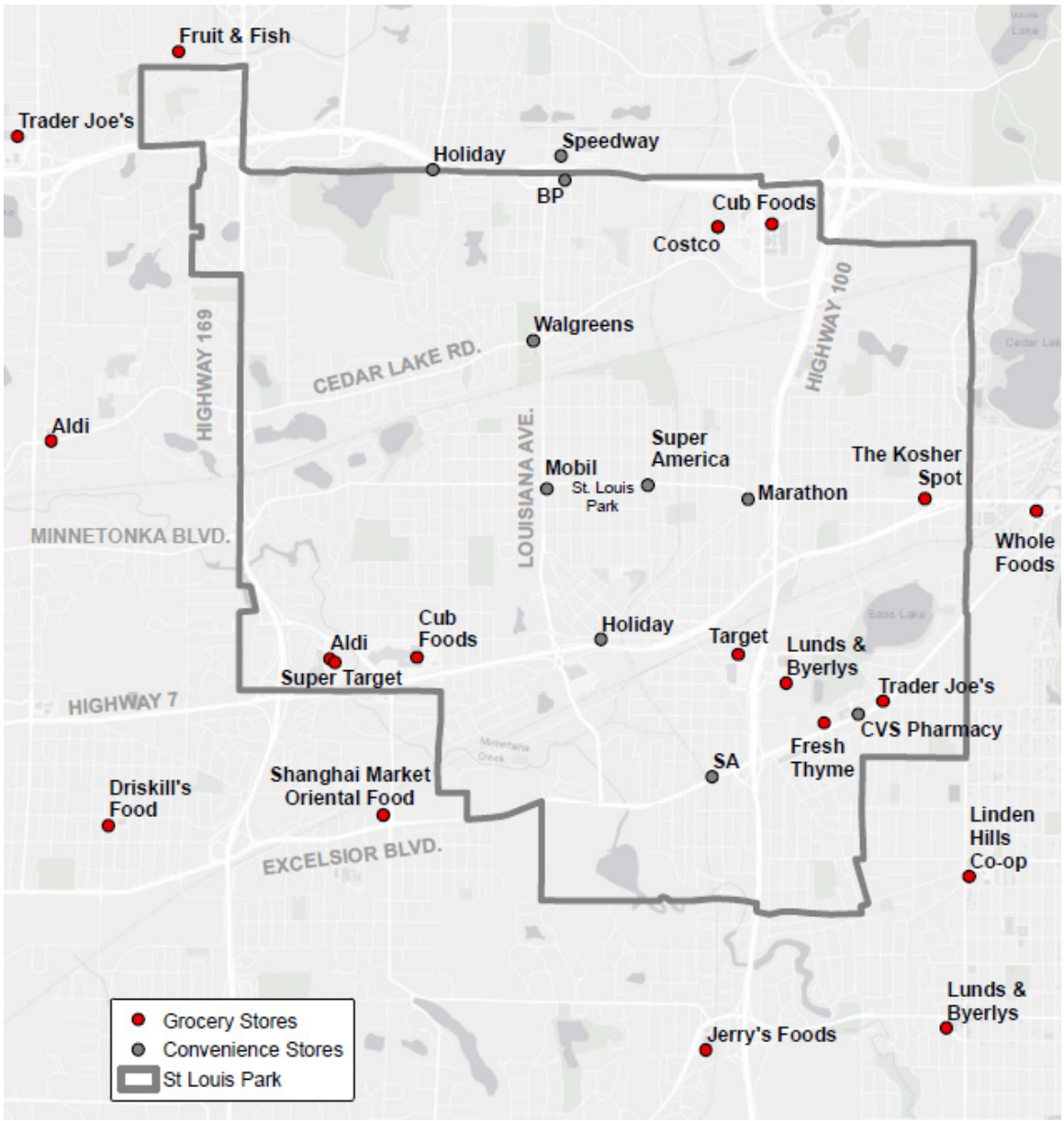
Many of these stores in St. Louis Park offer online shopping and grocery delivery services, with varied terms and cost. For example, Cub Foods charges $3.99 for delivery plus a 5% service fee for purchases of $35 or more. Aldi and Target both offer $99 yearly subscriptions for all delivery of purchases of $35 or more, with Aldi charging an additional 5% service fee for all purchases and a fee for bags. Residents who use SNAP or WIC program benefits to get food may need to pay out-of-pocket for these delivery costs. Meal service kits (e.g., Blue Apron) are also available, but tend to be fairly expensive ($10-$15 per meal portion).

Stakeholder impressions. Focus group participants mentioned Aldi, Cub Foods, and Fresh Thyme as the grocery stores they were most likely to go to for good deals. Some also mentioned going to Sun Foods in Brooklyn Park and So Low in North Minneapolis to purchase affordable food. When focus group participants were asked about delivery services, most said they did not use them and said they would not be interested in because they preferred to pick out their own food or did not trust delivery services to find the best deals. Others noted that a lot of delivery services do not accept electronic benefits transfer (EBT).

> *"I want to pick my own. Especially if you're asking for fruits or vegetables or meat. I wouldn't trust a stranger." – focus group participant from the food shelf*

> *"When I shop, I shop for deals. [Shoppers from delivery services are] gonna get the highest price." – focus group participant from the food shelf*

4. Map of grocery stores and convenience stores in St. Louis Park



Convenience stores

There are two drug stores and eight gas stations and convenience stores located in the city, which may be places where some residents purchase food. These are located near Highway 394, Minnetonka Boulevard, 36th Street West, and Excelsior Boulevard. This study did not include any observation assessment to determine whether affordable and healthy food options were available in these locations.

Food shelves and other food access programs

St. Louis Park has one food shelf, St. Louis Park Emergency Program (STEP), and a number of other food programs to help individuals and families access healthy foods (Figure 5. STEP provided food support to 3,260 individuals from 1,076 households during their last operating year (July 2018-June 2019). This represents about 7% of the population of St. Louis Park (J. Lapointe, personal communication, November 25, 2019).

Schools may also be an important source of food support. St. Louis Park schools offer free and reduced price lunch programs for qualifying students, as well as a free breakfast program. In addition, most schools offer additional resources. For example, all four elementary schools have programs where students can pick up backpacks of food to take home to their families on the weekends. Backpacks are provided by Sheridan Story, a Minnesota non-profit focused on ending child hunger. St. Louis Park High School has a student-run backpack program (called Birdfeeder) run by students and sourced through donations, and the local middle school has an on-site food shelf. Additionally, St. Louis Park Public Schools offers a summer breakfast and lunch program at Central Community Center, Peter Hobart Elementary School, and the St. Louis Park Middle School. However, school representatives noted that use of these programs is relatively low, compared to all who may be eligible for or in need of food support.

St. Louis Park has a number of additional food programs, including programs to provide residents with healthy food and fresh produce, food to purchase at below-market costs, or free meals (Figure 5). Some of the food access programs available in St. Louis Park serve the general population, while others are more targeted to students, aging residents, or clinic patients. These programs are located across the community, with a number being in fixed locations that have a fairly broad geographic reach (e.g., schools, the health clinic; Figure 5). St. Louis Park also administers Healthy Living Grants, which supports community members and organizations in implementing healthy living initiatives. Since its inception in 2017, it has funded several programs where residents learn about and develop skills to prepare healthy meals.

Stakeholder impressions. Overall, stakeholders felt that St. Louis Park has a number of other resources to support healthy food access for those most likely to be impacted by food insecurity. Although key informants felt that issues related to food access and insecurity generally mirrored other communities, some felt that there were more resources in St. Louis Park to address these issues.

> *"I think St. Louis Park is in a better position than many communities. It's a small community with a lot of support systems in place." – key informant*

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
St. Louis Park Emergency Program	A food shelf that also provides services related to clothing, transportation, and emergency assistance. The program also offers transportation to and from the food shelf and food delivery on a limited basis for clients who may need it. Clients are able to use the food shelf up to twice a month. In addition, the food shelf offers produce days every Tuesday, which do not count toward the monthly visits	■ Serves residents of St. Louis Park ■ Served 3,260 residents representing 1,076 households in fiscal year 2019	No cost
Fare for All	A nonprofit that buys fresh produce and meat in bulk, selling it at below-market prices for residents	■ Serves the general population ■ Fare for All has statewide data available, but not information specific to St. Louis Park.	Food is sold at below-market rates
Farmers markets	Two markets offering fresh produce and other products directly from farmers to consumers. The markets are at Methodist Hospital on Tuesdays and Park Nicollet Clinic and Specialty Center on Thursdays from mid-June through mid-October.	■ Serves the general population	Market or below-market rates
Weekly community meals at Westwood Church	A free weekly dinner every Wednesday prepared by volunteers	■ Serves the general population, especially church members, families who use the church's child care program, and older adults ■ 200-300 people served weekly	No cost

[3] Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff.

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park (continued)

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
Meals on Wheels	A meal delivery program providing fresh, nutritious meals to older adults and people living with living disabilities	■ Serves adults 65+ or individuals living with a disability or recovering from surgery	Meals on Wheels asks for a modest contribution toward your meals, with price based on need. Meals may be covered through Minnesota's home- and community-based services Medicaid waiver program or other subsidy programs
Perspectives, Inc.	A supportive housing program that has a food shelf for residents and houses the Cargill Kids Café, which provides cooking and nutrition programs for children and families who may be experiencing food insecurity	■ The food shelf serves residents of Perspectives, Inc. The Cargill Kids Café serve residents of Perspectives, Inc. and other families in St. Louis Park ■ 7,875 meals and 6,088 snacks served at the Cargill Kids Café in 2018	No cost
Twin Cities Mobile Market stop at Hamilton House	A grocery store on a bus that brings affordable, nutritious food to under-resourced neighborhoods across the Twin Cities	■ Serves residents of Hamilton House and surrounding areas ■ 125 transactions and $1,616 in sales at Hamilton House in the first two months of operation	Food is sold at below-market rates

3. Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff.

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park (continued)

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
SLP Seeds	A non-profit organization focused on food systems change that provides community gardening programs, cooking classes, and other activities	■ Serves the general population, with particular focus on youth engagement ■ Has served 2,000 individual meals and snacks to community members, distributed over 5,000 pounds of fresh produce at community events, and engaged 4,500 residents in educational activities	No cost for food distributions. SLP SEEDS recently began charging fees for educational activities, with ranges based on the activity. Partial and full scholarships for activities are available
Food box program through Park Nicollet Creekside Clinic and Pediatric Clinic (Park Nicollet Clinic and Specialty Center)	A program where patients experiencing food insecurity can receive boxes of healthy foods	■ Serves patients of Park Nicollet Creekside Clinic and Pediatric Clinic identified as needing food assistance ■ 280 food boxes given out in the last year (180 at the Pediatric Clinic and 100 at Creekside Clinic	No cost

3. Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff.

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park (continued)

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
Food box program through the St. Louis Park police and fire departments	A program where police and fire department staff can offer food boxes to households they encounter who may need food assistance	■ Serves residents of St. Louis Park who have interactions with the police and fire departments and are identified as needing food assistance ■ Approximately 50-75 are distributed by the police department annually. No boxes were delivered by the fire department in 2019	No cost
School breakfast and lunch programs	Breakfast and lunch programs provided by St. Louis Park Public Schools for preschool programs through high school Children in households who receive SNAP, Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits, and foster, homeless, migrant and runaway children automatically qualify for free meals. Other students may qualify for free or reduced meals based on household income	■ Of the 4,624 students enrolled in the district, 1,703 (36%) are eligible for free and reduced price meals ■ Of the students eligible for free and reduced price meals, 37% participate in the breakfast program and 82% participate in the lunch program	Full-price meals are $1.35 for breakfast, $2.80 for lunch at elementary schools, and $3.05 for lunch at the middle and high schools. Costs for reduced-price meals were not publicly available
Elementary school backpack programs	Programs at the four public elementary schools in St. Louis Park (Aquila Elementary School, Peter Hobart Elementary School, Susan Lindgren Elementary School, and Park Spanish Immersion Elementary School) that provide backpacks of food for students to take home on weekends. Backpacks are provided by Sheridan Story, a Minnesota non-profit focused on ending childhood hunger	■ Serves elementary school students and their families who may need food assistance ■ Serves 30-45 students at each school annually	No cost

3. Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park (continued)

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
St. Louis Park Middle School food shelf	A school food shelf	■ Serves St. Louis Park Middle School students and their families who may need food assistance ■ Serves 10-20 students annually	No cost
St. Louis Park High School Birdfeeder program	A student-run backpack program sourced through food donations from the community and small grants	■ Serves St. Louis Park High School students and their families who may need food assistance ■ Serves approximately 5 students weekly during the school year	No cost
St. Louis Park Public Schools Summer Food Service Program	A program funded by United States Department of Agriculture and administered by Hunger Impact Partners that provides breakfast and lunch during the summer months to students at eligible sites throughout the community, in school attendance areas or census tracts where at least 50% of students are eligible for free and reduced price meals. In 2019, meals were served at Central Community Center, St. Louis Park Middle School, and Peter Hobart Elementary School	■ Serves children up to age 18 in St. Louis Park ■ 1,025 served in 2019 (450 at Central Community Center, 250 at St. Louis Park Middle School, and 325 at Peter Hobart Elementary)	No cost

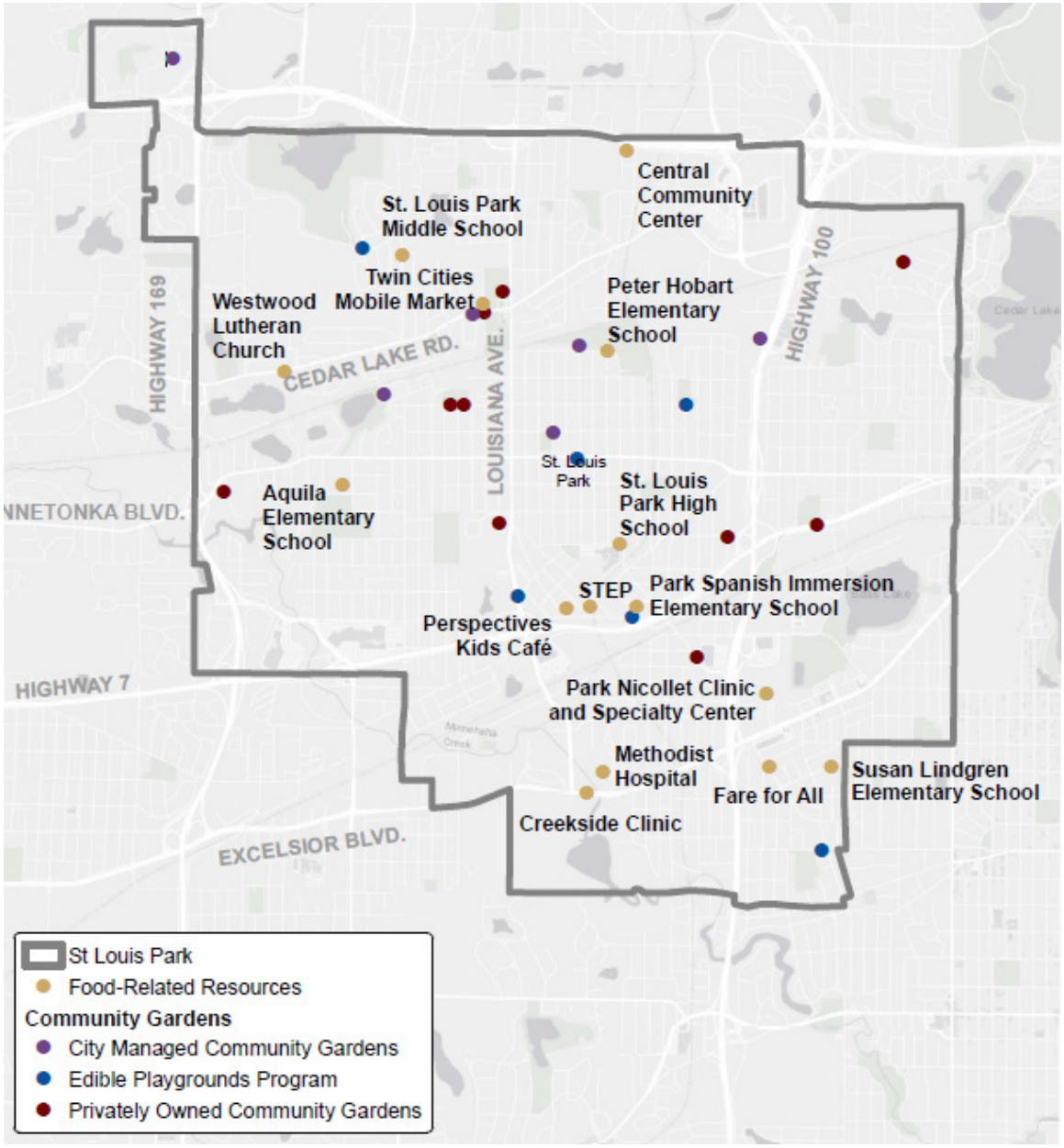
3. Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff

5. Description of food-related resources in St. Louis Park (continued)

Program	Brief description	Reach[3]	Cost for participants
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).	Two federal programs providing food assistance to families in need Eligibility for SNAP is based on household income, as well as other factors such as age, disability, or citizenship. Generally, households must be below 130% of the federal poverty line (FPL) in gross household income or 100% in net income to qualify WIC is available for pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women; infants up to their first birthday; and children up to age 5. Applicants must have income below 185% of the federal poverty line and meet the definition for nutrition risk, meaning they have at least one medical-based or dietary-based condition related to nutrition, including inadequate diet. Unlike SNAP, undocumented immigrants are eligible for WIC if they meet the requirements above	■ About 1,400 households received SNAP in 2018 (United States Census Bureau, 2020) ■ 839 women, infants, and children were enrolled in WIC in 2018 (Minnesota Department of Health, 2018b)	No cost.

3. Counts of reach for local programs were provided by program staff

6. Location of food access resources and community gardens in St. Louis Park



Community gardens and urban agriculture

There are 20 community gardens in St. Louis Park, including city-owned spaces, gardens at housing developments, spaces run by non-profit organizations, and edible playgrounds at three neighborhood parks. Of these, the city owns and manages five of these gardens, encompassing 110 plots. The city also provides financial support to SLP SEEDS to run the edible playground program. SLP SEEDS is a local nonprofit organization that has championed a number of local urban agriculture initiatives in the city. With the support

of volunteers and interns, the organization has provided education to residents interested in gardening, taught cooking and food preservation skills, and, through direct support and advocacy, increased the availability of community gardens in the city. Their work also includes distributing fresh produce to residents at a variety of community events and providing community meals.

A city representative noted that not all garden plots are used. Although the cost of a garden plot is $35 a year, residents can receive scholarships to eliminate the fee. Residents may have varied levels of awareness of community gardens. A number of focus group participants from the affordable housing complex made use of a community garden at the site. However, food shelf focus group participants were largely unaware that there were community gardens in St. Louis Park.

Other stakeholder impressions

Across all three focus groups, participants shared that they cooked at home frequently and enjoyed doing so. Youth surveyed also reported cooking at home, and described limited time as the biggest barrier to cooking more, especially with working parents. Among adults, the most commonly reported challenge to cooking at home was the need for more pots and pans or better kitchen equipment, including larger freezers to store food in their homes. Some participants also suggested that the food shelf could carry pots and pans. Focus group participants were also interested in new recipes, especially for healthy meals. The affordability and availability of food presented some meal planning challenges. Focus group participants described difficulty improvising recipes with existing ingredients when they were low on food. Another participant mentioned the challenges of cooking for children who were picky eaters, which could be especially difficult on a limited food budget.

> *"Yes. I like to cook. I always go to the grocery store and get what I want to cook." – focus group participant from an affordable housing complex*
>
> *"I cook at least once a day, whether it's breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Sometimes it is leftovers, but [I cook] at least something once a day." – parent from a supportive housing program*
>
> *"A challenge would be there's no food left. I run into that and then I have to make cupboard surprise." – parent from a supportive housing program*

What barriers and issues impact food security and access exist in St. Louis Park?

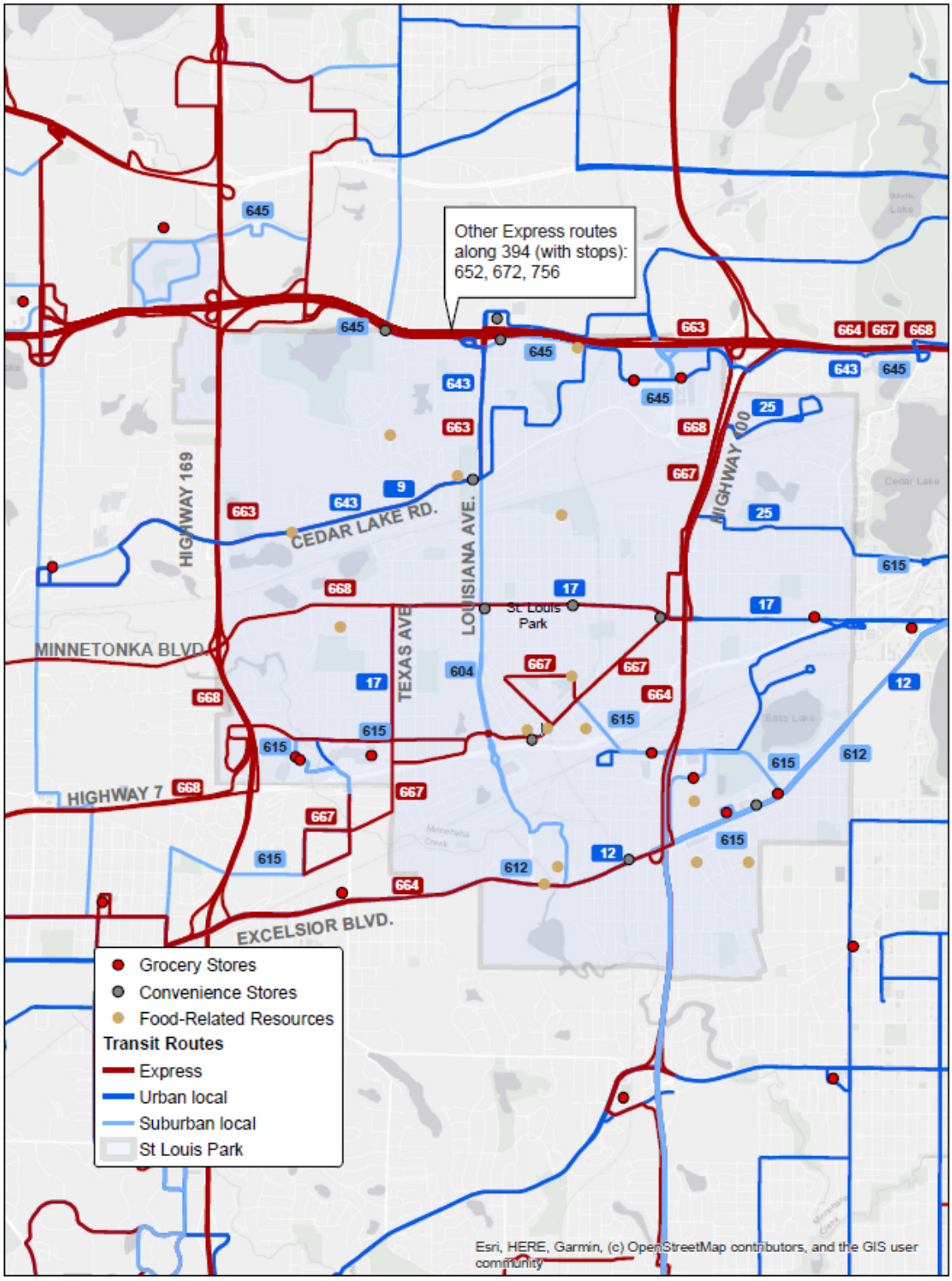
Limited transportation options

Key informants and focus group participants identified transportation as one of the most prominent barriers to food access in St. Louis Park. Although most residents in St. Louis Park have a car, those that did not had difficulty accessing grocery stores and other food-related resources. Eight percent of households in St. Louis Park do not own a vehicle (compared to 5% in Golden Valley; 6% in Edina, 13% in Hopkins, and 18% in Minneapolis; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). However, for those who did not own a vehicle, accessing grocery stores and other food-related resources remained a challenge. Key informants and focus group participants described the difficulties of having to walk long distances; getting to places in the winter months, especially for adults with limited mobility when sidewalks were more treacherous; or having to carry bags on public transportation. Many focus group participants went to multiple stores to get the best deals and stretch their budgets, which could be more difficult without a car.

Participants mentioned limited public transportation routes and schedules as a significant barrier. East-west routes in St. Louis Park are located along Cedar Lake Road, Minnetonka Boulevard, and Excelsior Boulevard (Figure 7). Buses run on these routes every 30-60 minutes, with some more frequents rush hour stops. The city has one major north-south route not along major highways (the 604) that runs along Louisiana Avenue. This route runs hourly during weekdays, but does not run past 5 p.m. or on weekends. Across discussions, focus group participants noted that the hours and infrequency of bus lines made it difficult to get to grocery stores and STEP. In addition, the lack of feeder lines to connect to these major routes makes public transit an unrealistic option for many residents, particularly those who have difficulties with mobility. Several described feeling "stuck" because of the lack of transportation routes near them or having to walk a long way to get to the bus stop.

> *"[The 604] only runs once every hour and it only runs until like 4 or 5 [p.m.], Monday through Friday. No Saturdays or Sunday[s]." – parent in a supportive housing program*
>
> *"I hope my car does not break. Because there's no bus close to me." – focus group participant from an affordable housing complex*
>
> *"The buses will go on the main thoroughfares, so you've got Minnetonka and Cedar Lake Road. Then the frontage road on Wayzata and Highway 7. Then you got the other way, Louisiana and Texas from Minnetonka to Highway 7… That's what you've got. That's all we have. So if you are stuck on either side of those, it's an oasis." – focus group participant from a food shelf*

7. Map of transit lines in relation to grocery stores and food-related resources



Note: This map includes routes with stops in St. Louis Park. There are additional express routes along highways in St. Louis Park without stops in the city limits that are not included on the map.

There have been some transportation programs to increase access to grocery stores and food-related resources, but they have struggled to be sustainable. STEP currently offers rides up to once a month to clients who have been seen by a social worker. A representative from the program reported that the program provides rides to about 30 people monthly, and delivers food to another 10 clients who are homebound. However, the program has also struggled with having enough volunteers to staff the program, and a program representative said that they would likely be able to expand the program if they had more volunteers. Another key informant noted that other transportation programs have been implemented, including a circulator bus and a dial-a-ride program. The dial-a-ride program was subsidized by the City of St. Louis Park and the Park Nicollet Foundation and run through the non-profit People Responding in Social Ministry (PRISM). Key informants noted that these programs ended because of funding.

> *"We could probably double the amount of rides we offer [to food shelf clients] if we had more volunteers to bring people in." – key informant*

Housing costs

High housing costs may place households at greater risk of food insecurity. Over a quarter of all households (29%) in St. Louis Park are cost burdened, meaning they pay more than 30 percent of their household income in housing (compared to 27% of households in Golden Valley, 28% in Edina, 36% in Minneapolis, and 38% in Hopkins; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). The lack of affordable rental properties may be a particular burden on families; 40 percent of renters are cost burdened, compared to 21 percent of homeowners (Minnesota Compass, n.d.). Key informants suggested that those who do not qualify for housing subsidies may be particularly impacted by housing costs. Of STEP clients reporting housing data, 90% were renters, with 49% paying market rate rent and 42% having a housing subsidy.[4]

When households have trouble affording housing payments, they often have to make difficult decisions about how to prioritize their dollars, including going without food. Key informants identified the lack of affordable housing as a key issue contributing to food insecurity. In one focus group, residents of an affordable housing complex expressed significant concerns about housing costs rising or being displaced because their building had new managers. They referenced similar displacement that happened several years ago at the Meadowbrook Manor (now named Era) when it was taken over by new owners. One participant shared frustration about city projects that contributed to higher property taxes but did not benefit those most in need of services.

[4] Totals do not add up to 90% due to rounding.

> *"Lack of affordable housing [is an issue]…Rent for a 2-bedroom [apartment] is going up over $1,400 and if you're making $31,000 a year, you're probably eligible for about $370 in SNAP, but your rent is over half your income. Then you add in utilities and you don't have money for food…I think it runs half and half of how many people that come [to the food shelf] have a subsidy, and the half that don't are probably coming in twice a month." – key informant*
>
> *"We can spend millions and millions and millions of dollars that my property taxes keep going up and up and up, and it's going to price homeowners out of our properties, but we can't afford to support the people in our community with necessary social services and food." – focus group participant from an affordable housing complex*

Financial insecurity, cost of goods and services

Low wages, access to health care, and costs of food may also be barriers to food security. Key informants noted that low wages and unemployment were significant contributors to food insecurity. Additionally, several key informants shared that many of the people they served had physical and mental health problems which led to higher health care costs and made it hard for them to work and take care of their health. (According to Minnesota Compass, 10% of St. Louis Park residents have a disability). Key informants and focus group participants also shared that the cost of food was a challenge in being able to make ends meet until the end of the month. Key informants and focus group participants noted that meat was particularly expensive, and several focus group participants advocated for having a low-cost meat retailer in the city. Youth who responded to the survey also identified low household income and the high cost of food as challenges to accessing healthy food.

> *"Challenges with employment, lack of employment security or a living wage really puts the pressure on. I think that is a growing area of concern." – key informant*
>
> *"When people struggle to get food from STEP, it's by and large due to transportation challenges or other crises in their lives [where] getting out of the house and to STEP is too burdensome. Often that's associated with physical and mental health challenges. I think with better health care access, particularly for chronic health conditions and mental health conditions, people would be able to access nutritious food on a more consistent basis." – key informant*
>
> *Certainly the cost of groceries. A lot of clients mention the cost of meat is astronomical. A pound of hamburger is over $6. – key informant*

Lack of awareness of existing resources

Some residents were unaware of available food resources. Focus group participants were asked whether they were aware of and had used different food-related resources in the community. By and large, STEP was the most recognized resource in the community. Community gardens and Fare for All were also relatively well-known among focus group participants.

However, focus group participants from the food shelf were largely unaware that community gardens existed in St. Louis Park, or were unsure about how to get a plot. In addition, more than half of respondents had never heard of or used the remaining food- related resources, including SLP SEEDS, school-based food programs, the community meal at Westwood church, and the food box program at the local health clinic.

> *"The families I've seen that have food insecurities are maybe newer families or don't know about all the access points to where affordable food can be." – key informant*
>
> *"When I'm riding, I don't see [any] community gardens like you do in Minneapolis." – focus group participant from the food shelf*
>
> *"I thought you had to have permission or know somebody [to use the community gardens]. That's what I heard." – focus group participant from the food shelf*

Although STEP offers some transportation services, including free monthly transportation for clients who had seen a social worker, and delivery for homebound residents, none of the focus group respondents mentioned these resources when discussing their concerns about transportation. (However, participants were not asked directly about these resources, and so this omission may not be an accurate reflection of awareness or usage of these services.)

Registration processes also made it difficult for people to sign up for available benefits. Several key informants suggested that the registration process for different benefits was a barrier to accessing these resources. For example, one resident noted that transportation barriers can make it challenging to meet in-person to sign up for the emergency food program. Another key informant suggested that free and reduced price lunch program requirements may be complicated to understand, or that parents may be reluctant to sign up because of concerns about how their information could be used by immigration authorities if someone in their family or network is undocumented. Although 85% of STEP clients live below 100% of the federal poverty line, only 53% were enrolled in one or more federal nutrition programs such as SNAP, WIC, or free and reduced price school meal programs. Some of these households may not be eligible for federal benefits due to other factors such as immigration status or may opt out for other reasons. STEP social workers do intakes with all clients to determine eligibility for various programs.

> *"Our food response right now requires people to get to a food shelf and go through the process of signing up and qualifying. I think sometimes that's just too much… Or people don't understand it… People shouldn't have to jump through hoops to qualify for food." – key informant*
>
> *"The free and reduced lunch, you have to apply for that and I think it can be a barrier for some families to understand that system and process to apply for free and reduced lunch." – key informant*

There may be opportunities to increase use of school food programs. Participation in the school breakfast and lunch programs, particularly among middle and high school students, is fairly low. Currently 37% of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch participate in the breakfast program (30% of middle school students and 19% of high school students) and 82% participate in the lunch program (74% of middle school students and 50% of high school students; W. Tai, personal communication, December 6, 2019). A number of factors may contribute to low meal participation. A key stakeholder familiar with the school meal programs shared that while there are food programs available through the schools, the ongoing challenge remains how to ensure students are accessing and using the resources, which is an area they are exploring more. The stakeholder noted there is interest and enthusiasm, both in the community and nationally through funding sources, around improving school meal programs. Updating aging infrastructure; reducing food waste; increasing fresh, local options; and expanding meal access outside of traditional breakfast and lunch programs through services like food carts are areas where there may be particular opportunity and energy.

When asked about what would make it easier for students to access the programs or improve the quality and selection of foods, youth surveyed mentioned expanding free and reduced price lunch programs or reducing the costs for students paying full price, having healthier options, more choices, and asking students for their input on menu options.

Case managers, health clinics, and word-of-mouth were important sources of information about food-related programs. When asked how they found out about different resources, focus group participants mentioned word-of-mouth. They also said they learned about programs from case managers and doctors. Park Nicollet also has a food resource manual of programs to give to patients who may benefit from additional services. There may be opportunities to leverage these channels to increase awareness of resources in the community.

Food shelf hours and food quality

Many focus group participants had used STEP and were able to share their experiences with the food shelf. Some conveyed great appreciation for the program, including STEP offering non-food items such as school supplies, cleaning and sanitary products, and clothes. They also shared that STEP provides foods for different diets, including vegetarian and diabetic, as well as culturally specific foods. In a 2018 STEP client survey, 97% of respondents said that the quality of the food they receive is always or usually of good quality and is safe to eat (D. Reise, personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, some participants suggested that the quality and selection of the products could be improved.

> *"I've been here for like 10 years and I've really had to depend on STEP. Oh my god, they had so much food. Such a big variety of meats and vegetables and cereals. I used to go and my cabinets were full from just going for like a couple months. Now you go and [it's] such slim pickings. I don't know what happened to their donations or something, but it's just very slim pickings." – focus group participant from an affordable housing complex*

Some food shelf participants reported getting food that was beyond the expiration date or had started to spoil, which made it difficult to stretch their food for the whole month. One participant shared that they go to the food shelf on Tuesday afternoons, when STEP offers a prepackaged bag of fresh produce and additional produce in the rest of the food shelf, to ensure they got the freshest selections. While most participants recognized that the food shelf can only offer what they receive through donations, some suggested that the quality of the food had especially declined in recent years.

> *"I would go Tuesdays [for free fresh produce], but I purposely schedule my food shelf for Tuesdays. If you have any luck on any kind of fresh stuff, you come up on a Tuesday. But that's even luck of the draw." – focus group participant from the food shelf*

STEP has policies in place to offer food beyond the expiration date when it is still safe and good to eat (e.g., up to six months for nonperishable items; up to three days for fresh and bagged produce). Meat and other refrigerated items are not accepted from individuals or unlicensed groups to help ensure food quality. STEP has also taken active steps to increase the amount and quality of food over the past five years, including a food rescue program with local retailers, which has increased the availability of fruits, vegetables, and deli items. According to STEP, these efforts and others have resulted in a 286% increase in total food available as compared to five years ago (D. Reise, personal communication, March 9, 2020). This study did not include an assessment of the quality of food available at the food shelf.

Limited hours at the food shelf makes accessing the service difficult for some clients. STEP is open during daytime hours Monday through Friday, with evening hours on Tuesday. STEP aims to be open as much as possible to meet the needs of most residents. In a recent client survey, 97% of respondents said that they could schedule an appointment when needed all or most of the time (D. Reise, personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, the limited availability of evening hours made it difficult for some focus group participants who work during the day or have family responsibilities in the evenings. One respondent expressed interest in weekend hours. These challenges could be compounded by the limited bus routes and schedules. A program representative noted that they may look into expanding their hours moving forward.

> *"When I was working, [the hours] didn't work for me. Because the one evening of the week that they're open, I had my kids. That just didn't work. I'm unemployed again, so it's fine. It just gets more complicated if you're trying to work around the hours they're open."*
> *– focus group participant from the food shelf*
>
> *"It would be cool to have Saturday hours… Not every Saturday, but they [could] do at least two Saturdays a month. Which for me to have to help my mom get her stuff, it helps for it to not be on a school day so I can actually do it." – focus group participant from the food shelf*

The food shelf has struggled to keep up with increased demands from funders and clients for healthy food options and expanded social services within its current capacity. Representatives from STEP noted that there are increasing demands on food shelves to offer healthy options and expanded social services, which many food shelves have struggled to keep up with based on current funding and space. In particular, a representative noted that expanding fresh produce offerings would require more refrigeration. Food shelf representatives also commented on the need for additional volunteers to staff its transportation program for clients.

> *"There's higher expectations in food shelves in terms of what we look like, how we operate, how accessible we are. The standards are going up, as they should. But it will take resources and care to keep up with those expectations." – key informant*

Accessing food when school is not in session

Accessing meals during the summer months remains a challenge for some families with children. Key informants and parents in the focus group suggested that accessing food during the holidays and summer months was still a challenge. The youth surveyed mainly had meals at home or from grocery stores during the summer months and parents from the focus group noted that their food budgets were often stretched in the summer. Although it is too small of a sample to draw strong conclusions, a number of the youth surveyed reported skipping meals "often" or "sometimes" during the summer months, with reasons including that they did not have food in the house, were not hungry, or were doing other activities.

St. Louis Park Public Schools offers breakfast and lunch program at several schools and at the Central Community Center. However, this may be an example of a resource that residents are unfamiliar with. None of the youth surveyed nor focus group participants had used the food program at Central Community Center. Both focus group participants and youth surveyed were able to cite food programs at Minneapolis parks, but were less aware of similar resources in St. Louis Park.

One of the community stakeholders speculated that participation in these summer programs may be low become some families are unaware that this resources is available to all youth

under the age of 18 or, due to transportation challenges, youth are unable to easily get to participating parks and community centers.

> *"When school's in session, they do eat less at home, but when it's not school, [it's] eat, eat, eat, constantly, buy, buy, buy…When school is in, they don't eat much [at home] for a good five or seven hours of the day. Then they've got activities after school. But summertime, all they're doing is eating." – parent in a supportive housing program*
>
> *"In Minneapolis, parks have breakfast/lunch programs. St. Louis Park should do the same but in more than just parks to make it more accessible." – youth survey respondent*
>
> *"I'd say summer meals are a concern. There are a lot of kids [who receive free or reduced price lunch during the school year] that we don't know how they are being fed in the summer. That has to do with one being aware of summer meal programs, or understanding that anyone under 18 can access a free meal, but knowing where those are and how to get transportation to those sites in the summer." – key stakeholder*

Stigma

Stigma, especially among older adults, may impact the extent to which residents experiencing food insecurity seek help and resources. Key informants suggested that stigma can play a role in the extent to which people may seek help by going to the food shelf or applying for SNAP. For older adults, it may be the first time they have experienced food insecurity or have had to ask for help. Stigma may exacerbate the ways that food insecurity remains a "hidden" issue in St. Louis Park. Some suggested that people may prefer Fare for All to the food shelf because they perceived less stigma associated with the program.

> *"It [can feel like a] shameful thing for a parent to say, I can't feed my kids. It is a shameful thing for a senior to say, I've worked hard all my life and I'm looking fondly at canned food. It's a shameful thing for a person just starting out [to say] I spent all this money for college, [but I] can't even feed myself….It's the myth of America that if you don't make it big, it's your fault. That's part of it." – key informant*

Stigma may also be an issue impacting the number of students who take advantage of free lunch and breakfast programs. Students were asked on the survey about ideas for ways to reduce stigma for young people and their families who may have difficulty affording food. Suggestions including ensuring resources are discreet while also talking more about food insecurity in the community. The school district has also taken steps to reduce stigma and barriers to access based on finances. The school district's policy on unpaid meal charges is to continue to provide meals to the students, while taking steps to collect unpaid debt in ways that are not stigmatizing to students.

Need for more culturally specific food options

Several key informants suggested the need for more options at existing grocery stores or for culturally specific retailers that reflect the growing cultural diversity of the city. Future engagement efforts should include gaining a better understand of whether new immigrant and refugee communities are able to easily purchase their preferred ingredients and foods, and the degree to which they are familiar with and feel comfortable accessing various community food resources.

> *"I think it would be interesting to pay attention to the current demographics of the area and whether food retailers are being culturally appropriate to the changing demographics." – key informant*
>
> *"I don't know that there are a lot of good cultural foods available. For example, in Minneapolis I think there are more stores that cater to Somali residents where they can get more foods they are used to. The stores we have here are lacking in some cultural foods." – key informant*

What strategies have other municipalities used to address these issues?

As described in this report, food security is a complex issue, as the availability and accessibility of healthy food are components of an interdependent food system. The Minnesota Food Charter (n.d.) identifies the following areas as potential points for action:

- Food skills: Growing food, budgeting for healthy meals, preparing food from scratch
- Food affordability: Residents being able to buy the healthy foods they want with the resources they have available
- Food availability: Having sufficient amounts of a variety of healthy food options
- Food accessibility: Sources for healthy food are easy to get to for residents, including residents who rely on public transportation
- Food infrastructure: The system in place for growing, processes, distributing, selling, making, eating, and disposing of food

The results from the study highlighted residents' concerns across these areas, although primarily in relationship to food accessibility, affordability, and availability, including how food is grown and distributed.

Local government can play a number of roles to improve access to healthy and affordable food and support a strong local food system. Across Minnesota and throughout the nation, local government has become increasingly involved in cross-sector planning and enacting policies and ordinances designed to address urban agriculture, create incentives and disincentives for food outlets, and reduce food insecurity (Gupta et al., 2018). Local government can also reduce food insecurity through economic development that provides grants, loans, and other financial incentives to support local growers, farmers markets, food distribution hubs, or other investments in local food systems. For example, some municipalities have supported the creation of food hubs to aggregate, process, and sell food from small farms and local growers by providing business development economic assistance or economic development grants. Other municipalities have reduced licensing fees to encourage convenience stores to sell more nutritious food options or established grants to increase refrigeration capacity at food shelves or convenience stores that adopt policies that increase access to nutritious foods (Massachusetts Department of Health, n.d.).

Given the breadth of options for increasing access to healthy food and establishing more equitable food systems, many municipalities struggle with how to best focus program priorities. It is important for municipalities to consider the time, resources, and staffing necessary to support both policy and program work, consider how governance structures

and community resources will impact implementation, and establish metrics to track progress (Hatfield, 2012).

Cities with relatively limited capacity may work to increase food access through small initiatives that leverage existing efforts. Municipalities that develop more comprehensive urban food policy programs focus on a wide range of issues, all requiring different types of interagency collaboration, key partnerships, and community engagement (Figure 8).

Cities that expand their efforts to improve the local food system are often catalyzed by: key political champions who establish food access as a priority; organizational necessity in response to a need for improved coordination across departments; community demand; or grant funding that creates an incentive for new work to occur (Hatfield, 2012).

8. Examples of strategies used in urban food policy programs

Food policy program area	Examples of strategies
Access and equity	Healthy retail initiatives, senior food assistance programs
Economic development	Small business marketing assistance, food employment training programs
Environmental sustainability	Sustainable food sourcing, climate change planning
Food education	Healthy cooking demonstration, food gardens
Local and regional food	Farm-to-table programs, institutional purchasing programs
Mobile vending	Mobile food retailers (e.g., Twin Cities Mobile Market)
Nutrition and public health	Early childhood nutrition program, Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) payment at farmers markets
Policy advocacy	Municipal food charters, state/federal advocacy
Urban agriculture	Zoning code changes, community garden programs
Waste management	Food composting programs

Adopted from Hatfield, 2012

Note: St. Louis Park does not have a named food policy program, but has implemented a number of these strategies, including: small business marketing assistance; healthy cooking demonstrations; a community garden program; climate change planning; and a food composting program

It is challenging to measure the degree to which interventions focused on increasing access to healthy food lead to long-term changes in healthy eating. Often, studies on the effectiveness of strategies to reduce food insecurity often focus on changes in consumption and purchasing patterns among residents who begin to use new programs or access food from new types of outlets, rather than on long term changes in food security. Recognizing these limitations in understanding the long-term impacts of any intervention, the following policy approaches and strategies used by other municipalities may be options for addressing the challenges and barriers identified by St. Louis Park residents.

Food Policy Council [5]

Relevance to St. Louis Park: A cross-sector group representing a broad range of interests and perspectives can help establish community priorities, engage residents, coordinate aligned efforts, and increase community awareness of existing resources.

Community-driven strategies for reducing food insecurity require an ongoing commitment for cross-sector planning and collective action. In a growing number of communities, Food Policy Councils (FPCs) have been established to help individuals and organizations work collaboratively and partner effectively with local government to implement policy and programmatic improvements that reduce food insecurity and create more equitable food systems. Effective FPCs include key representatives from public, private, and nonprofit sectors and are able to create inclusive and equitable processes to engage community members. FPCs can take many forms and be structured in multiple ways, such as through a local nonprofit, a grassroots collaborative, or through a government-mandated advisory body. Organizing the FPC to function with autonomy may help the collaborative function more independently and be better able to respond to community priorities that fall beyond the policy agendas of elected officials and government departments (Gupta, et al., 2018). Regardless of where the FPC is structurally located, local government can effectively engage with FPCs by: a) dedicating staff time and other resources to support the FPC; b) coordinating with FPCs to increase community awareness of existing resources; c) seeking advice from the FPC on potential policy proposals and strategies for implementing new policies; and d) embracing policy recommendations developed by the FPC (Gupta, et al., 2018).

Transportation

Relevance to St. Louis Park: Transportation was identified as a significant barrier to accessing healthy, affordable food.

There are a number of strategies that urban communities can use to establish reliable transportation options to help residents access grocery stores and locations where affordable, healthy food is available (Pothukuchi & Wallace, 2009). A number of options require a critical mass of customers to reside in close proximity. For example, Twin Cities Mobile Market, a mobile grocery store, currently has one stop in St. Louis Park, located at an apartment building in a neighborhood without a nearby grocery store. Some communities have created public-private partnerships to establish shuttle services to grocery stores and other outlets. These types of programs can have positive impact but, as was experienced

[5] The term, Food Policy Council, is used frequently in the literature to describe cross-sector planning and implementation groups. Municipalities and partners may use different terms to avoid confusion about the intended function of the group and its scope of influence.

in St. Louis Park, are often challenging to sustain financially. Other options include continuing to advocate for the expansion of routes operated by Metro Transit to connect lower-income neighborhoods to grocery stores, and increasing awareness and capacity of volunteer driver programs.

Farmers markets

Relevance to St. Louis Park: There are two farmers markets in St. Louis Park that are each open one day a week during the summer and early fall. Transportation challenges and the location of existing grocery stores and food resources are barriers for accessing healthy foods.

While farmers markers are often identified as a strategy for increasing access to healthy food and supporting local growers, their location, seasonality, types of payment options accepted, and community perceptions can all serve as barriers for residents to purchase food from these locations (Chen, Clayton & Palmer, 2015). In Minnesota, the Market Bucks program was developed to make it easier for individuals to use their SNAP benefits at farmers markets. At participating farmers markets, SNAP recipients can swipe their Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards at the market's information stand and receive tokens to purchase food from growers. As an incentive, customers using SNAP benefits can receive a specified match of Market Bucks coupons, which can be used to purchase from local growers. Similar programs have been established in other states to reduce barriers to accessing healthy, affordable food. These types of program reduce concerns around stigma, as tokens can also be purchased with debit or credit cards. In addition, by centralizing the process at the information stand rather than requiring individual growers to purchase EBT machines, the program reduces cost, time, and other administrative burden for local growers.

Local government can play an important role in advertising farmers markets and sharing information about how benefits can be used at farmers markets through outreach to SNAP and WIC recipients. Municipalities can also play a supportive role by identifying park sites which are easily accessible for pedestrians, cyclists, public transit users, and motorists and could be used for farmers markets (Public Health Law Center, n.d.)

Healthier food outlets

Relevance to St. Louis Park: In some areas of the city, including lower-income neighborhoods, convenience stores and other small food outlets are more accessible to residents than large grocery stores.

Although food access needs to be understood in the context of the local environment and economy, there is some evidence suggesting that in order to increase food access within a community, it is more effective to focus on adding small store retailers rather than large grocery stores (Bonanno & Li, 2015). Some communities have worked to increase food access through initiatives that make it more appealing for convenience store owners and other food retailers to sell healthier foods. These initiatives not only set new standards for healthy foods, but also provide varied levels of financial support and technical assistance to help business owners increase refrigeration capacity, connect with affordable produce distributors, or effectively market produce and other healthy foods to increase sales (Vasudevan, 2014). In 2008, the Minneapolis City Council adopted a staple foods ordinance[6] and healthy convenience store program to incentivize small business owners and other food outlets to provide more affordable, healthy food options. The revised 2014 ordinance identified 10 food items to be made available in all food outlets. In 2018, this was reduced to six key items: dairy or dairy alternatives; animal or vegetable proteins; fruits and vegetables; juice; and whole grains. The ordinance defines each food item, and establishes minimum standards for the amount of food available and variety of options within each category. An evaluation of the ordinance's impact emphasized the need for strong and routine enforcement, as well as other types of incentives, penalties, and technical assistance to help increase compliance and support changes in customer purchases (Laska, et al., 2019).

Local government can use a number of strategies to increase compliance and support changes among small business owners. For example, the Healthy Corner Store Program was developed by the City of Minneapolis to help small businesses comply with the ordinance, improve the presentation and marketing of healthy foods, and develop connections with distributors and resources for financial support. In Philadelphia, as store owners become increasingly engaged in their healthy corner store initiatives, they become eligible for loans and grants for upgraded equipment, including shelving, displays, and refrigeration, through the city's Fresh Food Financing Initiative (Bitler & Haider, 2010). Some state and federal resources are available to support small business owners in making store improvements and purchasing equipment needed to sell healthier food options, including the Good Food Access Program Equipment and Physical Improvement Grant (GFAP) administered through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

[6] The staple food ordinance was passed in 2008 and revised in 2014 and 2018. The current ordinance language can be found in Title 10, Chapter 209 of the Minneapolis Code of Ordinances http://www.minneapolismn.gov/health/living/eating/staple-foods

Healthy food shelf policies

Relevance to St. Louis Park: Some residents who used the local food shelf felt the quality and variety of healthy foods could be improved.

A number of food shelves have established policies to help ensure that food shelf customers have better access to nutritious and healthy foods. These types of policies provide guidance to volunteers and staff about which donations will be accepted by the food shelf and affirm the food shelf's commitment to customers. To implement an effective policy, food shelves may also need to develop strategies to inform donors and customers about changes in practice, consider the need to build new relationships to procure healthier food options, obtain additional storage space or refrigeration units, and seek input from customers to help refine the policy (Stuber, 2015).

Working with local growers

Relevance to St. Louis Park: The city has encouraged community gardening through local plans and policies. Further planning can help ensure these initiatives benefit residents as growers and as consumers.

Urban agriculture initiatives/community gardens. Urban agriculture initiatives can increase the availability of healthy foods in a community but, alone, will likely be insufficient in eliminating food insecurity (Siegner, Sowerwine, & Acey, 2018). However, urban agriculture can lead to increased access to and consumption of healthy food, greater social connectedness, and neighborhood improvements such as reduced crime rates and greater economic development (Chen, Clayton & Palmer, 2015). Studies demonstrating how community gardens impact family food expenditures are limited, but suggest that for some families gardening can result in notable savings (Brown & Carter, 2003). Some communities have paired community garden initiatives with programming to help communities learn how to grow, preserve, and prepare produce. The location of community gardens is key in determining who benefits from increased access to healthy foods. Local plans often focus first on reducing barriers to community gardens on privately owned land, which is less controversial than repurposing publicly held land but tends to benefit homeowners and middle-class families (Horst, Brinkley & Martin, 2016). Cities interested in expanding community gardens and other urban agriculture programs need to ensure that communities most impacted by food insecurity are engaged in planning and are able to access land and allocate funds so that local initiatives do not contribute to future disparities in food access (Horst, McClintock & Hoey, 2017). Accommodations or complementary strategies for residents who have mobility difficulties may also need to be considered.

Community-supported agriculture (CSA) is another strategy for local, small-scale growers to connect with customers and increase access to healthy foods. While the standard model of selling customers a series of monthly boxes at the beginning of a season helps growers receive payment for upfront costs and receive more predictable income, many lower-income families do not have the resources to pay for a CSA membership or are unable to use resources from public benefit programs to pay for these types of services (Chen, Clayton, & Palmer, 2015). To help improve access for lower-income residents, some communities have developed strategies to aggregate produce from multiple farms, which is purchased and distributed by local nonprofits. This is one of the multiple approaches used by Appetite for Change in north Minneapolis to create a more equitable food system and increase access to healthy food (Stuber, 2016). Initial start-up costs may require grant support, as a challenge in establishing these types of collaborative models is reaching the profit margins necessary for staff costs.

Farm to institution programs are also being increasingly used to provide healthier food options in schools, hospitals, and other settings by sourcing food from local growers. While evidence of the impact of these programs is limited, there is some research suggesting that farm to school programs contribute to students consuming more fruits and vegetables. Successful farm to institution programs do need to overcome some common challenges, including: cost of produce compared to processed foods; seasonality of produce and implications for menu planning; lack of kitchen amenities to prepare and store produce; and the cost of additional staff time to prepare meals using locally sourced foods (Harris, Lott, Vakins, Bowden, & Kimmons, 2019).

Partnerships

Relevance to St. Louis Park: There are a number of existing programs in St. Louis Park focused on increasing access to healthy, affordable food. Strong cross-sector partnerships can help ensure that resources are available to residents in locations that are easily accessible.

While a growing number of local governments are addressing food systems in the development of key planning and sustainability documents, it is not yet common practice for public health and planning departments to collaborate on a shared vision for a future local food system (Mui, Khojasteh, Hodgson, & Raja, 2018).

Cross-agency collaboration can support implementation of relevant comprehensive plan components, as well as the development, implementation, enforcement, and funding of new policies and initiatives.

In many communities, creative partnerships with schools, health care facilities, culturally specific organizations, public housing building managers, faith community leaders, and services for aging adults are used to increase awareness of existing resources and establish new initiatives to increase access to healthy foods. Food Rx/Veggie Rx is an example of an initiative in the health care sector where patients experiencing food insecurity receive prescriptions for healthy food, usually available on-site, to support their unique health needs. Additional cross-sector collaboration can help expand promising or effective programs into new areas or, through collaboration and sharing of resources, may reduce the burden of individual organizations to identify distributors.

What is the potential role for the City of St. Louis Park in addressing food security?

The City of St. Louis Park developed the Health in the Park Champion Program and Healthy Living Grant Program in collaboration with the school district and community residents to support health and well-being. Volunteer-led initiatives to support food access include healthy cooking classes and improvements to the school lunch program and nutrition curriculum. The city has recently increased the number of community gardens in the community. It also manages edible gardens as part of its Summer Park Playground Program.

Looking forward

Among stakeholders, many saw opportunities for the City of St. Louis Park to play a stronger role in **increasing awareness** of available local food resources and **improving collaboration** among schools, health care, nonprofit organizations, local businesses, faith-based organizations, and community members.

There was not strong consensus among stakeholders who participated in interviews and focus groups in what actions were most important to take in order to increase food security in the community. Stakeholders identified transportation as most frequent barrier to accessing healthy, affordable food. To address this issue, stakeholders suggested a range of options, including increasing the frequency of current transit routes (which are operated by Metro Transit, not the City of St. Louis Park), creating shuttle services or other types of transit to low-cost grocery stores and other food outlets, and providing food delivery services. To increase availability of affordable, healthy food in the community, stakeholders suggested: increasing the production and distribution of local foods through farmers markets, community gardens, and urban farms[7]; increasing the quality of foods available at the food

[7] Urban farms are used to produce, process, and distribute food in urban settings, whereas community gardens may be focused on individuals growing food for their own families. The term is often used interchangeably with urban agriculture.

shelf; and developing strategies to provide meals to youth during the summer. SLP SEEDS has strong interest in developing a year-round greenhouse to increase production of locally grown food.

Potential opportunities

- St. Louis Park has 30 neighborhood parks, 8 community parks, and 21 open park areas. City staff report that St. Louis Park has locations to expand community gardens or be considered as potential farmers market locations when the need is present. At this time, not all available garden plots are used.
- The city's 2040 Comprehensive Plan outlines a number of principles that support mixed-use and transit-oriented development to improve transportation and increase access to healthy foods.
- Supporting student nutrition is a priority for the St. Louis Park school district, and there are a number of efforts underway to increase student participation in existing programs, as well as to improve the quality of food and consider how schools are part of the local food system. Currently, St. Louis Park school kitchens are being remodeled to support on-site, from-scratch cooking.
- Within St. Louis Park, there are a number of existing food programs, including a food shelf, school-based programs, and urban gardening. Expanding the programs described earlier in the report (Figure 5) may be potential starting points.

Challenges

Location of existing resources. Zoning ordinances passed in the 1950s that outlawed mixed-use buildings led to areas of St. Louis Park being developed with separated residential and commercial areas. This has influenced the design of some neighborhoods, including the location of grocery stores and other food outlets, making some difficult to reach. These zoning ordinances have changed over time and there are now more mixed-used developments in the city (e.g., Excelsior & Grand). The 2040 City Comprehensive Plan continues the city's vision for more multi- use development and development centered at transit hubs, but it will take some time for this vision to come to fruition.

Reaching residents experiencing food insecurity. Results from the study suggest that some food resources available in the community are not being fully utilized. The reasons for this are unclear, and may vary by age, culture, or geographic location. Resources intended to help reduce food insecurity need to be targeted appropriately so that new initiatives do not further exacerbate disparities in access to healthy foods.

Increasing both availability of healthy food and consumer demand. Food access is a system-level challenge that needs to be addressed by both making healthy foods available and increasing consumer demand for them. Without doing so, new initiatives may be unsustainable.

Additional resources

Just as each community is unique, the policy strategies that can be used to reduce food insecurity are varied and shaped by the local environmental, economic, political, and social context. There are a number of summary documents, including the resources highlighted below, that provide examples of local planning approaches and policies to reduce food insecurity and establish more equitable food systems.

Good Laws, Good Food: Putting Local Food Policy to Work for Our Communities. This toolkit, developed by the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic, was designed to be used primarily by food policy councils but is also more broadly relevant to nonprofit organizations and local governments. It provides suggested strategies for a wide range of options to increase food access and create more equitable local food systems.
http://foodsecurity.org/pub/GoodLawsGoodFood.pdf

Healthy Eating Policy Options for Minnesota Local Govenments. The Public Health Law Center created a resource for local government entities and partners to describe the policy strategies that can be used to work towards a more equitable food system.
https://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/FGM-PolicyGuide-HealthyEating-2017.pdf

Healthy Food Policy Project. Multiple examples of local ordinances and case studies, focused on strategies developed to reduce food insecurity in specific communities, are available on this website and through a searchable policy database.
https://healthyfoodpolicyproject.org/

Planning Innovative Local Government Plans and Policies to Build Healthy Food Systems in the United States. This document provides brief examples of planning and policy strategies used by local government entities to create stronger and more equitable food systems.
https://ubwp.buffalo.edu/foodlab/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2017/06/planningtoeat5.pdf

Minnesota Food Charter. This statewide planning document was developed with input from stakeholders across the state. It outlines a number of strategies that can be used to increase access to healthy foods by increasing food skills, improving access, increasing

affordability, ensuring healthy foods are readily available for all residents, and enhancing the overall food system.
http://mnfoodcharter.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/MNFoodCharterSNGLFINAL.pdf

Municipal Strategies to Increase Food Access. This toolkit, developed by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and key collaborators, includes a summary of strategies that can be used by cities, including information on how these strategies align with planning activities, the strength of evidence supporting each strategy, and the type of community where the strategy can be most effective.
https://mapublichealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/municipal-strategies-to-increase-food-access-toolkit.pdf

Recommendations

What role can the city of St. Louis Park have in supporting greater food access and security for residents?

This study focused on understanding barriers to food access in St. Louis Park and identifying strategies to address these concerns. Many municipalities across Minnesota and nationally are playing larger roles in developing local food systems and reducing food insecurity among residents. The following recommendations, informed by local data and current research, provide the City of St. Louis Park with approaches that can be used to build on existing resources and address barriers identified by local residents and community stakeholders. These recommendations focus on opportunities and barriers that most directly impacted residents' abilities to access healthy, affordable food. However, as noted in this report, food security is a complex issue that is impacted by a variety of factors. In addition to the strategies below, the city is encouraged to continue to work with partners to explore approaches to reduce the cost of living and address other social determinants of health, such as expanding affordable housing, establishing a citywide minimum wage, or increasing health insurance coverage and care.

- **Establish and support a local cross-sector task force to establish priorities and strategies, increase community awareness, and guide collaborative actions.** Cross-sector efforts are critical to creating sustainable changes to impact an issue as multi-dimensional as food security. Food Policy Councils are one model of cross-sector task forces, but the city may consider other models based on the needs and interests of local stakeholders. Any group should include residents who have experienced food insecurity and strategies to seek input from residents who have most difficulty accessing healthy, affordable food.
- **Identify creative strategies to increase transportation options, including expanding volunteer driver programs, and continue to advocate for Metro Transit to expand transit routes.** The city's comprehensive plan does set a long-term vision for mixed-use development that may lead to food retailers being located in areas where access to local grocery stores is most challenging. However, more immediate changes are needed to address current transportation challenges. The city and its partners should consider the feasibility of a variety of options, including: developing or expanding a volunteer driver program to grocery stores or food programs; creating a program providing residents with vouchers or credits for existing transportation or grocery delivery services; developing partnerships to increase the number of local drivers for public and private transportation services; increasing the number of

Mobile Market stops; and working with Metro Transit to determine options for expanding existing public transit options.

- **Increase awareness of existing food resources, particularly programs and services reaching youth, aging adults, immigrant and refugee communities, and residents experiencing economic insecurity.** Information gathered through the study suggestions that residents may not be aware of resources currently available in the community. Regardless of whether some type of cross-sector task force is established, the city and other agencies can work to increase awareness of existing food programs on their websites and through other communication approaches. The city can also consider strategies to work with partners to increase enrollment in available benefit programs (e.g., SNAP, free and reduced price lunch program).
- **Assess the feasibility of additional strategies to increase access to healthy, affordable food in St. Louis Park.** Successful strategies to increase food security need to address local barriers to accessing food, reflect the interests and priorities of community members, and be feasible to implement in terms of financial cost, staff time, and other resources. In order to prioritize how to move forward with a set of clear strategies, the city needs to clearly articulate any parameters impacting what they can support and then assess the feasibility of key options, considering factors such as: cost(including staff time associated with initial start-up and sustained operations); the degree to which the intervention will successfully reach residents impacted by food insecurity; likely changes needed in other aspects of the food system to support a new initiative; and interest among community members. Some of the strategies identified in the report that could be further assessed are listed below:
  - Implement policies and enact changes to increase the availability of fresh produce and high-quality foods at food shelves, such as changes in the types of donations accepted and a statement of practices that prioritize the procurement and distribution of healthy foods.
  - Identify park sites or city-owned properties for farmers markets located in neighborhoods with limited access to grocery stores.
  - Develop local ordinances and provide technical assistance to incentivize small business owners to sell healthy, affordable food.
  - Continue to monitor the need for additional community garden plots in different areas of the city and consider expanding opportunities to sell or donate locally grown food.

- **Identify local data sources that can be used to track changes in who is experiencing food insecurity in St. Louis Park.** There is not an existing source of data to describe the prevalence of food insecurity in St. Louis Park. If it is critical for the city to have additional information to understand the prevalence of the issues and impact of interventions, a community survey using standardized questions to measure food insecurity could be useful. Alternatively, ongoing tracking and reporting of food access program use and demand by local organizations could help identify changes in food insecurity among residents.

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Appendix A

Research methods

A multi-method approach was developed with staff from the City of St. Louis Park to understand the landscape of food access and food security in St. Louis Park and the needs of specific groups experiencing food insecurity.

GIS mapping. Maps can be an effective way to show locations of resources, gaps in services, and demographic information about communities. Wilder Research created an interactive mapping tool that included information identified as of interest to City of St. Louis Park staff for this study. The map included the locations of grocery stores, convenience stores, food-related resources such as the food shelf and other programs intended to increase access to healthy food, community gardens, affordable and class C (naturally affordable) housing, and transit routes. It also included demographic information by census tract, such as the percentage of adults 65 and older, the percentage of residents by race and ethnicity, the percentage living below the poverty line, the percentage eligible for SNAP, and the percentage of children eligible for free and reduced price lunch. Select maps are included in this report. City staff were also provided with the interactive tool for further exploration. The maps in this report include the following data sources:

- **Affordable housing.** The affordable housing layer contains publicly funded (subsidized) rental housing in Minnesota. The rental housing included in the layer has a long-term rent restriction (or direct rent subsidy) that makes it affordable for those earning 80% or less of the area median income (AMI). This includes Public Housing, Project-Based Section 8 housing, Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) properties, and many other programs funded at the state or local level. Emergency shelter and transitional housing is not included. Source: HousingLink Streams Database (Affordable housing database for MN). Data date: December 31, 2015.
- **Community gardens.** The community gardens layer contains the locations of community gardens provided by the City of St. Louis Park and SLP SEEDS. It contains city-managed community gardens, edible playgrounds programs, and privately owned community gardens. Source: City of St. Louis Park and SLP SEEDS. Data date: 2019.
- **Convenience stores.** The convenience store layer contains convenience stores and gas stations. A convenience store is small local shop carrying a variety of everyday products, mostly including single-serving food items such as milk, bread, snacks, and groceries to over-the-counter medications, household items, stationery, and small auto supplies such as fuses. Source: Overpass turbo (A data mining tool for running queries on an

interactive map) and additional stores and gas stations provided by the City of St. Louis Park. Data date: Open source.

- **Food deserts.** Low access (1 mile). This layer contains census tracts in which at least 500 people or 33% of the population lives farther than 1 mile (urban) from a supermarket. Source: USDA Food Access Research Atlas. Data Date: 2015.
- **Food deserts.** Low access and low income (1 mile). This layer contains low-income census tracts where a significant number or share of residents is more than 1 mile (urban) from a supermarket. Source: USDA Food Access Research Atlas. Data date: 2015.
- **Food-related resources.** This layer contains food-related resources provided by St. Louis Park, such as food shelves or food programs. Source: City of St. Louis Park. Data date: 2019.
- **Grocery stores.** The grocery store layer contains grocery stores and supermarkets. A grocery is a retail store that specializes in selling non-perishable food. A supermarket is a large store for groceries and other goods. It's a full service grocery store that often sells a variety of non-food products as well. Source: Overpass turbo (A data mining tool for running queries on an interactive map) and additional stores provided by the City of St. Louis Park. Data Date: Open source
- **Poverty status.** The poverty status layer contains the percent of the population who are below the federal threshold for poverty, based on the population for whom poverty status is determined. The federal poverty threshold for a family of 2 adults and 2 children is $25,465. Source: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2013-2017 5-year data. Data date: 2019.
- **Transit routes.** The transit routes layer displays Metro Transit routes, broken up by their bus type of express, suburban local and urban local. Source: Metro Transit. Data date: April 29, 2019.

Review of existing datasets. A number of existing data sources were consulted to provide population level data for St. Louis Park including demographics and other factors related to food access and security. Sources included 2013-2017 American Community Survey data through the U.S. Census Bureau and Minnesota Compass, the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey, 2018 Metro SHAPE data, and 2018 program data for the St. Louis Park Emergency Program (STEP).

Key informant interviews. Interviews were completed with nineteen stakeholders who could speak to issues related to food access and food security in the City of St. Louis Park. Key informants represented a variety of sectors including representatives from emergency food assistance programs, non-profit organizations, medical clinics and public health organizations, human service agencies, the school system, the faith community, and grocery

stores. Key informants were identified by city staff, with additional recommendations provided by interviewees. Key informants were asked about current resources and barriers to food access and security, populations that might be most impacted, and recommendations for future work to address these issues.

Focus groups. Three focus groups were held with residents representing groups most likely to be impacted by food insecurity, identified through the key informant interviews and in consultation with city staff: residents at Oak Park Village, an affordable housing complex; clients at the local food shelf (STEP), and parents from Perspectives, Inc., a supportive housing program. A total of 31 people participated in the focus groups (10 from Oak Park Village; 10 from STEP, and 11 from Perspectives, Inc.). Focus group participants were asked about where they went for groceries; barriers to accessing healthy, affordable food; and what they would like to see in their community to support better food access and security. Participants were given an informed consent form with information about the study to sign before agreeing to be in the focus group. Those who participated received a $30 gift card. Demographic information for the focus group participants can be found in Appendix B.

Focus group survey. Focus group participants were also invited to complete a survey at the end of the discussions. The survey asked about demographic information, including age, gender, race and ethnicity, and income. It also included two validated measures of food insecurity from the U.S. Household Food Security Module, and a question about participants' awareness of different food-related resources in St. Louis Park. Completion of the survey was optional for focus group participants and not required for receipt of a gift card. A total of 28 participants completed the survey (7 from the affordable housing complex, 10 from the food shelf program, and 11 parents in supportive housing).

Youth survey. A survey for youth was developed with questions adapted from the focus group survey and discussion protocol. The survey was distributed to participants in a youth program through Treehouse, Inc, a program for teens in St. Louis Park focused on building relationships and resiliency. The survey asked about where youth got meals during the school year and in the summer months, suggestions for ways to make it easier for young people to have enough to eat and access healthy, affordable foods, awareness of food-related resources in St. Louis Park, and demographic information. Youth were asked to have a parent or guardian sign a consent form before completing the survey, and were told that their participation in the survey was optional even if their parent or guardian had signed the form. Youth were given a $10 gift card for completion of the survey. Twelve youth completed the survey. Survey data, including demographics for the sample, can be found in Appendix C.

Literature review. A focused literature review was completed to identify promising approaches to addressing food access and insecurity at a local government level. The review focused on strategies for addressing challenges identified by local stakeholders and building on existing resources. The literature review was also used to identify resources to be used by the city and key partners for ongoing planning and strategy development.

Review of existing documents. Additional documents were reviewed to provide further context to the study, including the St. Louis Park 2040 Comprehensive Plan, past city planning documents, and websites and other materials from various food-related resources in the city.

Appendix B

Survey results and demographics of focus group participants

A short questionnaire was administered to focus group participants at the end of the discussions with questions about demographics and more sensitive questions about food insecurity. Completion of the survey was optional. Twenty-eight of the 31 people across the three discussions completed the survey.

B1. Age of participants

What is your age?	Residents in affordable housing (N=7)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (N=28)
12-17	0%	10%	0%	4%
25-34	43%	0%	27%	21%
35-44	0%	10%	46%	21%
45-54	43%	40%	18%	32%
55-64	14%	20%	9%	14%
65-74	0%	20%	0%	7%
75 or older	0%	20%	0%	0%

B2. Gender of participants

What is your gender?	Residents in affordable Housing (N=7)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (n=28)
Female	71%	100%	100%	93%
Male	29%	0%	0%	7%
Transgender female	0%	0%	0%	0%
Transgender male	0%	0%	0%	0%
Self-identify	0%	0%	0%	0%

B3. Race/ethnicity of participants

Which of the following describes you? (Check all that apply)	Residents in affordable housing (N=7)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (N=28)
Black or African American	43%	50%	73%	57%
White or Caucasian	29%	20%	27%	25%
American Indian	0%	0%	27%	11%
African native, including Oromo, Somali, Ethiopian, etc.	29%	0%	0%	7%
Hispanic or Latino	0%	20%	0%	7%
Asian, including Southeast Asian	0%	10%	0%	4%
Another race or ethnic group	0%	10%	0%	4%

The respondent who selected "another race or ethnic group" specified Hawaiian and Puerto Rican.

B4. Annual income of participants

What was your annual household income in 2018?	Residents in affordable housing (N=5)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (n=26)
Less than $10,000	40%	40%	64%	50%
$10,000 to under $15,000	20%	30%	18%	23%
$15,000 to under $25,000	20%	0%	9%	8%
$25,000 to under $35,000	20%	10%	9%	8%
$35,000 to under $50,000	0%	20%	0%	12%

B5. Number of people supported by income

How many people does this income support (including yourself)?	Residents in affordable housing (N=5)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (n=26)
One	40%	50%	0%	27%
Two	20%	0%	46%	23%
Three	0%	20%	27%	19%
Four	20%	10%	18%	15%
Five	20%	0%	0%	4%
Six	0%	20%	9%	12%

B6. Poverty status of participants (calculated based on reported income and household size)

	Residents in affordable housing (N=5)	Food shelf clients (N=10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	All (n=26)
Less than 100% of the federal poverty line (FPL)	60%	60%	91%	73%
100%-200% of the FPL	40%	40%	9%	27%

B7. Food insecurity among participants

Please indicate how often the following was true for you or your family in the last 12 months.		Residents in affordable housing (N=3-4)	Food shelf clients (N=9-10)	Parents in supportive housing (N=11)	Total (N=23-25)
We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.	Often	2	5	6	13
	Sometimes	1	5	5	11
	Never	0	0	0	0
The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more.	Often	2	3	7	12
	Sometimes	2	5	3	10
	Never	0	1	1	2

B8. Residence of participants

What neighborhood do you live in?	Residents in affordable housing (n=5)	Food shelf clients (n=10)	Parents in supportive housing (n=11)	All (n=25)
Texa Tonka	20%	30%	100%	56%
Oak Hill	80%	10%	0%	20%
Lenox	0%	20%	0%	8%
Aquila	0%	10%	0%	4%
Somewhere else	0%	30%	0%	12%
I'm not sure	0%	0%	0%	0%

Appendix C

Youth survey results and demographics

A survey was administered to young people who were part of a youth program through Treehouse, Inc., a program for teens in St. Louis Park focused on building relationships and resiliency. Youth were asked to have a parent or guardian sign a consent for to complete the survey, but participation in the survey was optional, even if their parent or guardian had given permission. Twelve youth completed the survey.

C1. Sources of food for youth

Where do you or your family usually go to get groceries? (N=12)	%
Grocery stores	92%
Food shelves	17%
Gas stations or convenience stores	8%
Somewhere else	8%
Other food programs	0%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	0%

Note: Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select more than one option. The respondent who selected "somewhere else" specified Walmart.

C2. Youth's awareness and use of food access resources in St. Louis Park

Please let us know if you have heard of or used this program.	I have used this program	I have heard of this but I have not used this	I have not heard of or used this program
STEP (St. Louis Park Emergency Program) (N=12)	58%	25%	17%
Community gardens (N=12)	8%	25%	67%
Fare for All (N=12)	0%	83%	17%
Westwood Lutheran Church community meal (N=12)	0%	33%	67%
Central Community Center summer meal program (N=12)	0%	33%	67%
SLP SEEDS (N=11)	0%	27%	73%
St. Louis Park Middle School food shelf (N=12)	0%	25%	75%
Backpack programs at elementary schools (N=12)	0%	17%	83%
Birdfeeder program food assistance at St. Louis Park High School (N=12)	0%	17%	83%
Creekside Clinic food box program (N=12)	0%	17%	83%

C3. Frequency of cooking meals at home

In a typical week, how often does your family cook meals at home? (N=12)	%
Most days (5-7 days a week)	25%
Some days (2-4 days a week)	58%
Not very often (one day a week or less)	8%
I'm not sure	8%
Not applicable	0%

C4. What would make it easier for your family to cook meals at home?

Not working all the time.

If mom was home around dinner time more/if we weren't so busy.

When my mom is home from work.

Having the time without any plans so they can cook.

My mom having the energy to.

More quick meal ideas.

Having enough pans to cook in.

Affording more ingredients.

Supply of food and money.

Not sure.

C5. Frequency of eating breakfast at school

How often do you eat breakfast at school during a typical week in the school year? (N=11)	%
Most days (4-5 days a week)	17%
Some days (2-3 days a week)	17%
Not very often (one day a week or less)	42%
Never	17%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	8%

C6. Frequency of eating lunch at school

How often do you eat lunch at school during a typical week in the school year? (N=11)	%
Most days (4-5 days a week)	50%
Some days (2-3 days a week)	25%
Not very often (one day a week or less)	17%
Never	0%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	8%

C7. What would make it easier for students to use the school breakfast and lunch programs?

For it to be free, just because you don't qualify doesn't mean you can afford it.

Families with single parents that make a lot of money should let kids eat free.

Making the food free, or cheaper.

If she had reduced lunch.

Cheaper lunch, better lunch.

Food choices that they chose/like. A more home-cooked feel to the food choices.

If we had better food.

Better selection of desired foods.

If the food was better.

They have the food.

Food that I would enjoy and eat often.

C8. How could the quality or selection of foods in the school breakfast and lunch programs be improved?

More fresh fruits and vegetables and just healthier fresher food.

Have more protein and better cooked.

Better, healthier options.

There was better food.

Asking kids what they want.

Have more meals that are appealing to students.

Foods that are similar to what kids eat outside of school.

More choices, they have the same stuff every week.

More lines for lunch.

So they can choose what we wanna eat.

C9. Do you have any other suggestions about school breakfast and lunch programs?

If there was better, healthier options. Again, better food.

They never change the menu.

No, thank you for listening.

None.

No (6 responses).

C10. Sources of meals when school is not in session

During the summer when school is not in session, where do you usually go to get breakfast and lunch? (N=12)	%
At home/bring lunch from home	100%
At friends' or families' houses	8%
At work	25%
At schools or community centers	8%
At grocery stores	50%
At gas stations or convenience stores	25%
At fast food or other restaurants	42%
Other (please specify)	0%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	0%

C11. Ease or difficulty of getting meals when school is not in session

On the weekend or during the summer, how easy or hard is it to get meals when school is not in session? (N=12)	%
Very easy	42%
Pretty easy	50%
Pretty hard	0%
Very hard	8%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	0%

C12. What suggestions do you have for ways to make it easier for kids to have meals during times when school is not in session?

In Minneapolis, parks have breakfast/lunch programs. SLP should do the same but in more than just parks to make it more accessible.

Maybe STEP or some other place have available meals for students.

Lunch and breakfast from park houses.

More community meal opportunities.

They got enrolled in a program.

Start a free food company only in the summer.

To go to a food shelter or a friend's that you can trust.

Buy food from the grocery store that's cheap but nutritious.

Eat at least three times a day or two.

C13. Frequency of skipped meals during the school year

During the school year, how often do you skip meals in an average week? (N=12)	%
Most days (4-5 days a week)	8%
Some days (2-3 days a week)	50%
Not very often (one day a week or less)	42%
Never	0%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	0%

C14. Frequency of skipped meals during the summer months

During the summer months, how often do you skip meals in an average week? (N=12)	**%**
Most days (4-5 days a week)	8%
Some days (2-3 days a week)	50%
Not very often (one day a week or less)	33%
Never	8%
I'm not sure	0%
Not applicable	0%

C15. If you skipped meals during the school year or summer months, what are some of the reasons why?

During the school year:

Don't want it or don't have money in lunch account.

Don't have money.

Can't get free lunch.

The food is nasty.

Food makes me sick.

Nausea.

Wasn't hungry.

I say I'm hungry but don't eat.

Don't feel like eating.

The lines are long to eat and the time is short.

During the summer months:

Not having access to it.

Not any in the house.

Don't get fed often or I choose to.

Wasn't hungry.

Same thing (I say I'm hungry but don't eat.)

I eat often.

Lose track of time.

Just sleep for hours instead of eating.

C16. What do you think is the biggest barrier for young people to be able to have enough to eat and get healthy, affordable food in St. Louis Park?

Healthy food is more expensive.

Because fresh produce is more expensive.

Family can't afford it.

The parents not getting paid enough.

Not having access to it.

Expense. Also, I personally see more unhealthy ways to get food than healthy on a regular basis.

The amount of fast food restaurants, which is a lot, and money problems.

People that would [out us], if some people don't have food at home.

I don't know really.

C17. Food insecurity among youth

Please indicate how often the following was true for you or your family in the last 12 months.	Often	Sometimes	Never
We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. (N=11)	0%	36%	64%
The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more. (N=10)	0%	20%	80%

C18. Some youth can experience feelings of stigma or shame if they or their family do not have enough to eat. What ideas do you have for how to reduce stigma for young people and their families who have difficulty affording food?

To talk about it more. People are open about that kind of stuff.

Talking about it more as well as making it known that it's not the youth's fault that they don't have food.

Making programs and stuff more discreet.

People or teachers should just not talk about it.

More food shelves.

They get enrolled with free programs.

Think about ways to find food.

Pray and hoping someone would help with the food someday.

Seek help, go to food shelters, or ask other people you trust.

C19. Please share any other ideas for ways to make it easier for young people to have enough to eat and get healthy, affordable food in St. Louis Park.

Just having more programs and things available.

Give good food away in every community or door to door.

Open up a place easy to get to. They can try handing out meals.

Give gift cards to grocery stores.

For the people who do not have a lot to eat, we should make a free food service.

Feeding the kids healthier foods.

I don't think I have any others. Thank you for listening.

C20. Gender of youth respondents

What is your gender? (N=11)	%
Female	91%
Male	9%
Transgender Female	0%
Transgender Male	0%
Self-identify (note if you wish)	0%
I don't want to answer this question	0%

C21. Race and ethnicity of youth respondents

Which of the following describes you? (Check all that apply) (N=11)	%
Black or African American	82%
African native, including Oromo, Somali, Ethiopian, etc.	9%
Asian, including Southeast Asian	0%
Hispanic or Latino	9%
American Indian	9%
White or Caucasian	27%
Which of the following describes you? (Check all that apply) (N=11)	
Another race or ethnic group	0%

Note: Percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select more than one category.

C22. Residence of youth respondents

What neighborhood do you live in? (N=12	%
Aquila	17%
Bronx Park	8%
Creekside	8%
Sorenson	8%
Texa Tonka	8%
Westwood Hills	8%
Amherst	0%
Birchwood	0%
Blackstone	0%
Brooklawns	0%
Brookside	0%
Browndale	0%
Browndale Park	0%
Cedarhurst	0%
Cedar Manor	0%
Cobblecrest	0%
Crestview	0%
Eliot	0%
Eliot View	0%
Elmwood	0%
Fern Hill	0%
Kilmer	0%
Lake Forest	0%
Lenox	0%
Meadowbrook	0%
Minikahda Oaks	0%
Minikahda Vista	0%
Minnehaha	0%
Oak Hill	0%
Pennsylvania Park	0%
What neighborhood do you live in? (N=12	%

C22. Residence of youth respondents (continued)

What neighborhood do you live in? (N=12	%
Shelard Park	0%
South Oak Hill	0%
Triangle	0%
Westdale	0%
Willow Park	0%
Wolfe Park	0%
Somewhere else	25%
I'm not sure	8%

Note: One of the respondents who selected "somewhere else" noted Minneapolis. The other two did not specify.

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