

## Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 10

# Food Insecurity in Minnesota: Who is Affected and How to Ensure Everyone Has Enough to Eat

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

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### Transcript

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**Paul Mattessich:** Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal: to provide insight on significant issues, combining sound information with expert knowledge, to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. In this episode, our topic is food insecurity. Three experts have come to the studio for our conversation. Rebecca Mino is manager of applied research and public policy for Second Harvest Heartland, one of the nation's largest hunger relief organizations. Ethan Neal is the food systems manager for Pillsbury United Communities and manages food shelves, community meals, and urban farms across Minneapolis. Maddie Hanson-Connell is a research associate at Wilder Research. Her work includes research about environmental and food justice in Minnesota. Welcome, and thanks for joining us in the studio. So to begin this conversation, it would be good to have one or two definitions. What exactly is food insecurity? What do we mean by food insecurity?

**Rebecca Mino:** So the way the USDA defines food insecurity is a lack of available financial resources for food at the household level. So it's basically, if people don't have the food that they need to eat on a daily basis.

**Paul:** And the food they need to eat, is there a scientific definition for what that means or how is it determined if people have enough food to eat?

**Rebecca:** Lack of consistent access to enough food for a active, healthy life.

Paul: Okay. Okay. And who's affected by food insecurity in Minnesota? Primarily who would be the people who are most affected by it?

Maddie Hanson-Connell:

Really we see food insecurity affecting people across the state. I don't know that there's a specific profile of people. I think that's maybe one of the common myths is that it looks a particular way. And I think in particular with COVID happening right now, food insecurity can really affect anyone. We do know, with some work that Rebecca and her team has been doing at Second Harvest that sort of our pre-COVID data was that 1 in 11 Minnesotans struggled with food insecurity.

And now the numbers are more like 1 in 8. And so that's an addition of 275,000 people, roughly, that are experiencing food insecurity. And among that some of the data that's coming out of the U.S. Census or the ACS data, they did an additional census pulse survey since COVID started that they've stopped in July to reframe some of the questions. But by July, we were really seeing that Black and Hispanic/Latino Minnesotans, those rates of people experiencing food insecurity were more than double of their White counterparts. And so that's really troubling that we're seeing such high numbers.

Paul: So, certain groups of color, double the rates of their White counterparts. And you mentioned pre-COVID and post-COVID, pre pandemic, post pandemic. So 1 in 11 before the pandemic and now roughly 1 and 8. And of course that could change over time. Those are some of the statistics. Rebecca, Ethan, in your organizations, what are you seeing happening at the ground level?

Ethan Neal: At the ground level, so I manage sites in the Phillips neighborhood of South Minneapolis and Cedar Riverside in Minneapolis. And what we've seen is a dramatic increase in the number of first time visitors and folks traveling farther from outside the city and outside of our typical area codes, visiting multiple food shelves, trying to procure enough food to really survive at this point. And so we've seen a doubling in the amount of food that has gone out the door and nearly a doubling in the amount of clients that we have been serving.

Paul: And you said a lot of them are new, first-time people?

Ethan: Many. Yeah.

Paul: Many.

Ethan: And we've done almost 1,000 intakes so far since March 17th.

Rebecca: And our data really shows the same thing. Based on what we've seen, we have three times more new food shelf users within the service area in Minnesota that we see. So a lot of new, first time users.

Paul: So, that concerns the volume or that describes the volume changes to us. And it corresponds to what Maddie had said about the overall statistics. What about the needs of the people who are coming into this, has that changed with the onset of the pandemic? Or is it just that there's more people, but their needs are essentially the same?

Ethan: For me, the needs are always going to be constantly changing. And we do a lot of work for culturally specific foods and making sure that food isn't just food to a lot of folks, food is culture and culture is sent down through food. So it's something that's very important that we're still being able to provide the culturally relevant food as well. And so, but the thing about culturally relevant food is it typically is more expensive and we don't have as much money to be able to buy that food. A lot of folks don't recognize that at the food shelf level, that we're buying a lot of food from the Second Harvests and The Food Groups that we have a budget that's really used to help support these families. And so when we have more people, that's less budget our budget isn't necessarily changing for the influx of people that we're seeing.

Paul: Okay. So volume has increased, potentially some things about the demand and the needs have increased because of some cultural differences and trends, but the amount of funding you have has not necessarily caught up with that increase?

Ethan: Not at our level. I mean, there's been amazing work done at Second Harvest and The Food Group, the two big food banks that service Minnesota, that they're sending free food. They've eliminated the fees for the trucks to be able to come. That really helps support us at the food shelf level. So it is happening and we are supporting the food shelves in that way, but there's still a lot of work to do and a lot more necessary funding to help support the food shelves at that level as well.

Paul: Rebecca, did you have any other perspective on that to add to what Ethan said?

Rebecca: No, I mean, I think Ethan really did a good job and, as Ethan mentioned, we are getting a lot of donations right now because it is such a huge problem in Minnesota and throughout the country. And so the donations that are coming in that's what many of them, most of them are getting used for right now is to make sure that we're sending food out for free to food shelves across our service area so that nobody's not getting food because of budgets.

Paul: Sure. So among any of you, as we're talking about this at a general level, are there any facts about food insecurity that you think most people don't understand, but they ought to understand. Or do any myths exist that people should disbelieve get rid of those myths about food insecurity?

Ethan: Ooh. The one myth I would like to get rid of is that folks visiting food shelves don't necessarily want healthy food or fruits and vegetables. That people necessarily want to live off of shelf stable food, right? So we're going to pay for that at the end and the health cost as well, because you see a rise in diabetes, heart disease, things like that, if you really are just eating unhealthy food. And so many of our clients, of the people coming

into our food shelves, are asking for healthier options, fresher options. So that's been a lot of work at our level is to partner up with Second Harvest and local farmers to make sure that we're bringing in this healthy food to the community.

Paul: Other facts that people ought to know or myths that they should get out of their heads?

Rebecca: Yeah. I think one of the things that we hear a lot is if you're coming to a food shelf, it's because you're unemployed and that's just not true. There are so many food shelf users who have a part-time job or a full-time job. Nearly 9 out of 10 -- so almost 90% of working households -- have an annual income of \$30,000 or less. So, if you're making \$30,000 a year, even though you're working, that just doesn't go very far, especially when the cost of housing keeps going up, right now the cost of food in the grocery store is going up. So, many, many, many people who work at, or who are using food shelves do have employment of some kind. So, that's just simply not true.

Paul: Just a brief footnote: cost of groceries, has that been a steady trend or has there been an uptick because of the pandemic, or something else right now?

Rebecca: Well, I mean the food supply chain is kind of a mess right now because of COVID. So that's impacting grocery stores. I mean, you see it when you go into the grocery store as certain items they'll have limits on. So, the supply chain is kind of a mess that way, and that has caused some costs to increase. And we see that on a food bank level as well. Our ability to source certain foods is much, much more challenging right now because of some of the supply chain issues.

Paul: Sure. I can see where that would happen. And we're going to get into challenges in a minute. I know that Maddie had a comment on, is it a fact or a myth?

Maddie: Yeah, kind of both.

Paul: Both?

Maddie: Yeah. I just wanted to underscore what Rebecca was saying about the myth of people who are food insecure, not being employed. And I think that translates also into people who use SNAP benefits. They just released some new ACS data on the 2019 usage estimates. And again, 2020 is going to look really different. But, in general, there was only 13% of families who were receiving SNAP that did not have at least one wage earner in their family. And so I think that's a huge thing 87% then of families receiving SNAP have somebody who's working in their household. And I think people just don't realize that it's actually much harder to get SNAP if you don't have dependents and you could be working because there's an actual work requirement that's temporarily suspended right now. I should also clarify SNAP is supplemental nutrition assistance programs. So what we have formerly called as food stamps, that a lot of people would maybe be familiar with that vernacular too. So, yeah, I think there's just some myths around benefits use and that's worth dispelling.

Paul: Yeah, it's helpful. Very helpful to know. So, Rebecca, you started to talk about challenges. You were mentioning the supply chain. You want to elaborate either on that or on some of the other challenges that you are facing right now in terms of getting your work done?

Rebecca: Yeah. So, there's a couple, so one is in less populated areas of Minnesota, so some of our more rural areas, our food shelf partners are having a really hard time finding volunteers. So, typically volunteers at the food shelf and some of the food shelves in the state are run solely by volunteers. And a lot of those volunteers are retired folks who in the current climate are at higher risk for COVID just because of age. And so a lot of our food shelves are having a hard time finding volunteers, which is a challenge. And then I'll let Ethan talk more about it, but because of COVID restrictions and having to stay six feet away and wearing masks, just the operation, the daily operations of a food shelf and meal programs looks very different now than it did a year ago.

Paul: Ethan, what about that?

Ethan: Oh, I'll tell you exactly how it's been difficult. And so if we look at our food shelf, for example, the whole industry, we are really moving towards a client choice model where shoppers or clients or community members come into the food shelf. They have a shopping list. They grab the food that they would like and actually have that client choice. That has entirely changed into pre-packed boxes. Or we do individual shopping carts where we ask the people what they want, we pick it out, we give it to a picker who then picks that food and makes an individual food box for the client. And we've given out just over 500,000 pounds of food since March 17th, between our two food shelves. And that means one of our staff or our volunteers, or interns has carried every single pound of that out to someone's vehicle, out to the six foot table that we put the food on. So the onus has come back onto the staff to lift every single one of those boxes.

Paul: And then the challenge must be intensified, though, if what Rebecca said is true about fewer volunteers to do that carrying and picking, and...

Ethan: Absolutely, we were also someone that lost a lot of volunteers. And so we've been able to supplement that with some partnerships, especially with St. Thomas, where we have college-age interns. We did that all summer. And we actually have a new cohort starting this week. So we've been able to supplement in other ways, but that's been very difficult.

Paul: Are there other challenges that either of you have seen in your organizations that you'd like to bring up now?

Ethan: For me, when I go back to that healthy food side of it, giving out produce can be much more difficult than anything else, right? It takes proper storage, it takes space, it takes a lot more cleanup. It takes organics and composting. And so it's been a little difficult this year, seeing the big influx in the amount of people, but we haven't had any sort of increase in the amount of refrigeration space at this time, freezer space, all of that has just been a lot more difficult. Seeing the volume of folks that we've been seeing and trying to still provide that help the culturally specific food.

Paul: So what are the most important things we need to do to address this right now, whether it's logistically at the level of distribution or it's in the supply chain or policy level, whatever level you want to think about, what are the most important things we need to do to address food insecurity?

Rebecca: I mean, I think there's a lot of opportunity. One of the things that we've been really working really hard on at Second Harvest is de-stigmatizing hunger. It's really challenging to go get help if you need it.

Paul: So when you talk about de-stigmatizing, you mean in the mind of the person who needs the food?

Rebecca: In the mind of the person who needs the food and then all the people around them.

Paul: All the people, okay.

Rebecca: If you need help, but you feel like you shouldn't be getting it. It's a really hard lift to go in and ask for that help. So I think one of the things that we find really important at Second Harvest is that we talk about hunger. It exists. A lot of people were facing it before COVID, and as Maddie said, the numbers even more are... Even more people are facing it now.

Paul: What other the things you've been doing to talk about it?

Rebecca: Yeah. So we have, we're working on a marketing campaign, so you actually might see a billboard out and about that talks about it. We're really trying to encourage our volunteers, our donors, our employees, everybody, any community member can help. And all you have to do is talk to your neighbors, talk to your friends, talk to your family members. The more that you talk about the issue, the more you probably will realize that people around you have dealt with this or are dealing with this right now and having those conversations and being open about it can go a really long way in helping people feel comfortable and knowing that it's not their fault that they're hungry, and that makes it easier for people to go get help.

Paul: Sure. That makes a lot of sense. Other things that we can do to fix this?

Maddie: I think from a policy perspective, there's a couple of different approaches, two of which I want to highlight specifically. Again, the SNAP program is a huge asset for people. I know Rebecca has some numbers, too, about how much more impactful SNAP can be. Do you want to talk about that for a second, too?

Paul: And you did define SNAP before for us. Are you suggesting SNAP has been a success?

Maddie: Yeah, I would say it's a huge success. Actually. It's one of the most successful things to alleviate hunger. I think something that we see from our data at Wilder with our homeless study, for example, not everybody who's homeless is using SNAP. It's actually really low presents from men in particular, but 59% of people who are homeless used

SNAP and, of all of the different benefits that they are accessing, including things like health services, transportation, all of these other major assets, the highest percentage of people said that SNAP was the most helpful thing to them, which was shortly followed by hot meals. And so we really see that food is very important to vulnerable populations and SNAP can make a big difference.

Rebecca: Yeah. I mean the economic research, the USDA economic research service has done studies previously and SNAP has been shown to be one of the most effective anti-poverty programs that we have in this country. And in terms of accessing food, while food shelves and food banks play a large role, it's not nearly as effective as SNAP as a program. So for every one meal that food shelves like Ethan's and food banks like ours distribute, SNAP provides nine. So that is a big difference. And then the other thing with SNAP -- kind of back to the idea of client choice -- is if you have SNAP, you get to choose how you want to spend that money and what kind of food that you want. Whereas, especially in COVID times, it's harder to do that at a food shelf. So SNAP has just a very, very powerful tool to make sure that people can get the food that they want and the food that they need. And there are some policy options, or right now we're really pushing for a 15% increase in SNAP benefits because that can really help families who have SNAP benefits get more.

Paul: Sure.

Ethan: Yeah. Something that the CEO of Second Harvest always says is that hunger is a solvable issue. And that's something that rings in my mind a lot, is it takes us all having a very concise effort together from the community member to those in need, to the government, working together, to figure out the solutions to this issue, because it is something that we can solve. And it's something that we can do at a policy level. I'm very thankful that I don't have to work on the policy side of things. That's not my passion, that's not my strength, but I'm really thankful that there are people like Rebecca and Second Harvest and all these other food advocates that are really advocating for those policy changes. Because right now, at least from the industrial, I also come from an industrial farming background a little bit with my family. Right now we spend a lot of our funding supporting an unsustainable farming and agricultural program in this country. And we just need to figure out, "How do we spend this money in a better way that truly helps everyone?"

Paul: Sure. That sounds like a very holistic approach. Maybe not one that's easy to implement, but something that's necessary. Other things any of you would mention about fixing this problem or are there other policies we should bring into the conversation?

Maddie: I think the one thing that I would really underscore, as I was talking about a little bit at the beginning, we're really seeing massive disparities across racial lines right now, particularly with Black and Hispanic/Latino residents in the state of Minnesota. And I think when that is happening, we have to really look at what the history of policies have been and the history of racism and discriminatory practices. In Minnesota, we have racial covenants, there's been unequal access to wealth building through things like the GI bill or the New Deal that other people, or White people, got to access. And with all of

those policies, we're currently at a place where the average income for White people is around \$71,000; the average income for residents of color is only at \$48,000. So as Rebecca was saying that when you have this income challenges like buying food is really hard. And so if you have that massive amount of disparity already, we really need to focus policies so that they can help build wealth in those communities of color.

And I think some of that some of the more long-term policies to consider are things around increasing the minimum wage, some guaranteed basic income, some of these more holistic pieces around expansion of affordable housing and investments in education and employment and transportation. As Ethan was saying, it's really a big holistic piece, but we really need to consider how to make things more equitable, both from a food security lens and also from an income and wealth building lens as well.

Paul: So what I'm hearing from you, Maddie speculating based on your wisdom and that of Rebecca and Ethan, is that it's not just money, money will help, but it needs to be a much more holistic approach to do a variety of things that will eliminate food insecurity. Is that true?

Maddie: Yes. I mean, there are so many different factors that go into food insecurity. However, the biggest driving factor really is lack of money. And I think once people have access to money in different ways, then they can help alleviate some of the other barriers. For example, if you didn't have access to transportation, but then you got an influx of money to be able to afford a car, then that reduces that barrier that makes access to food a little bit more easily accessible.

Rebecca: I think we've done, we did a study a couple of years ago with some, I think from the University of Minnesota researchers. And one of the things that they found is so food is such a flexible part of someone's budget and, or a family's budget. And so that's one of the first things that goes when there's not food, or sorry, when there's not enough money, food is one of the first things to go. So a recent study showed that there are, there are a lot of things that families do, they trade off. So, and they kind of find other ways to get by. So families are cutting back, 49% of families cut back on medical expenses, according to this survey, 74% skipped washing dishes, or doing laundry. So there are all sorts of things that families can do to try and make their budget. And these figures just show what people are having to do because they don't have the money. And food really is one of those first things to go.

Maddie: Yeah, the trade-offs are sometimes astounding, I think. What people are forced to make decisions around.

Paul: So what about the typical person in Minnesota who would like to do something about food insecurity and they have limited time, limited money. They're certainly concerned about the topic, but there's only so much they can do. What would your recommendation be on how people can help?

Ethan: Yeah. I have a few ideas. I mean, for me, I give a lot of talks to local Rotary Clubs. I'm very involved in the Rotary Club and something I always say is, "As much as I would

love your money, or Second Harvest would love your money, work with your local food shelf." Most small towns have one. Most of them need support, whether that's volunteering or monetarily. That's something to think about. The other one that we love to see in particular, our food shelf is at home gardeners that are gardening and providing that healthy produce into the food shelf for us to distribute to the folks that need it. If anyone's ever had zucchini or kale in their backyard, you're probably producing too much. I mean, I always tell people if you're having an at-home garden, you only need one kale plant. It's going to produce more than you need. So donate the rest of that to your local food shelf. And we can help find homes for that food.

The other one I think is always really fun is in offices. So many offices do canned food drives, which then I take our food shelf van and I go out and pick up this giant tub that's super heavy, or we get a pallet jack out and bring in a big pallet because canned food is very heavy. But one thing that's really fun is to do spice drives. So a lot of the time we have the money to get canned food from the TEFAP program, the emergency food assistance program. So we get a lot...

Paul: Thank you for defining it.

Ethan: You're welcome. So we get a lot of free food into food shelves using that TEFAP program, but we don't necessarily have the money for the spices that make something amazing, right? So you can always make chili, but you just need that little bit of cumin. And when you have a very stretched food budget, \$4.99 for a little thing at cumin, isn't going to be where you spend your money. So it's always a nice surprise for folks in food shelves when we have the spices for them to take this food and turn it into a meal for their families.

Paul: Yeah. In bringing donations to a food shelf, I never would think of that. So, that's very helpful to know. And the other things you said, I don't know that I would have thought of either, but they sound very practical.

Rebecca: Yeah. So I would echo what Ethan said. I'm going to go back to talking about the issue of hunger with your friends and your family. It's really, really important. And then advocating for some of those state and federal policies, like the expansion of SNAP and the additional resources through the SNAP program. I think that's a really good way to help support people. And you can go to our website two, the number [2harvest.org/advocacy](https://2harvest.org/advocacy), to learn more about some of those options, but call your local Congress person and your house of representative and fight for some of those programs.

Maddie: Yeah. I would definitely underscore that again as well. One of the things, I was on a webinar that Feeding America was a part of and the University of Texas was a part of, and somebody had analyzed the USDA data, looking at SNAP usage and looking at hunger over the course of the last recession. And the data showed that it took 10 full years for people to return to pre-recession levels of hunger and pre-recession levels of benefit needs. And so with that standpoint, we have a lot of temporary waivers and expansions put in place with SNAP program and some of the other benefits programs

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and the funding that food shelves are able to access, like everything is set up in a really temporary fashion to deal with COVID right now. But really those impacts are very long lasting. And so pushing to make sure that that support is in place, not just in the next year, but in the next 10 years to really help people recover from the current crisis that we're facing.

Paul: It's a long, very long-term effort that's required. So, Rebecca, you started to mention a source where people could get some more information. Are there any other good sources that any of you would want to recommend? And we can put these recommendations on our website, along with the podcast when it's posted. Any that you'd want to mention?

Ethan: Yeah, for me [hungersolutions.org](http://hungersolutions.org) is a great one. They advocate, but that's also where you have your local food shelf finder. So if you are in need, that's the place that you can go for it to find that extra food, but then also it talks about that policy level and what are the bills and the specific measures that are being taken at that policy level. So, it's a great place to inform yourself as well.

Paul: Sounds valuable.

Rebecca: The Feeding America website, so that's the national kind of network of food banks, and they have tons of great information on their website. So, that's what I would highly recommend. And then the census website has some really good information and is fairly easy to use as well. So, that's another great source of information.

Paul: Okay, that's good to hear.

Maddie: Yeah. And I think we've been doing some work at Wilder, actually with Minnesota Compass to further analyze some of that census data to make it a little bit more digestible. And so they've been using some of that census pulse data that I was referencing earlier. So, if you're interested in diving into the numbers, check out the Minnesota Compass website as well. And then I'd say from a national lens FRAC, the Food Research and Action Council also provides a good, clear advocacy pathway. And then some really interesting stuff on USDA with food access: they have all these different interactive maps that you can play with to see what food and hunger look like in your area.

Paul: So we're at about the close. Thank you. This has included a lot of very helpful information about what food insecurity is, whom it affects, what we might do about it. Thank you very much for joining us. In this episode, we had Rebecca Mino, the manager of applied research and public policy for Second Harvest Heartland, and Ethan Neal, the food systems manager for Pillsbury United Communities, and Maddie Hanson-Connell, a research associate at Wilder Research, please visit our website, [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org) for more information on this topic and for a list of all of our podcasts. If you have suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research and I look forward to talking through the numbers with you on other topics.

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