Food is a Right: Libraries and Food Justice

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL
JANUARY 2023

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Introduction

Public libraries are trusted community institutions that are addressing food insecurity among many local, regional and national issues. This paper frames the current state of food insecurity across North America and the strategic role libraries play in addressing local needs. Included are descriptions of programs, services and activities leading libraries are implementing and recommendations for other library leaders to follow in ensuring their community is nourished.

Participating Libraries and Organizations

The following libraries and organizations participated in the 2022-2023 Urban Libraries Council Libraries and Food Security Initiative and contributed to the findings in this report.[1]

- Alexandria Library, Alexandria, Va.
- Appalachian Regional Library, North Wilkesboro, N.C.
- Arlington Public Library, Arlington, Va.
- Association for Rural & Small Libraries, Seattle, Wash.
- Botetourt County Libraries, Botetourt County, Va.
- Central Arkansas Library System, Little Rock, Ark.
- Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, S.C.
- DC Department of Parks and Recreation, Washington, D.C.
- Grand County Public Library, Moab, Utah
- Lorain Public Library System, Lorain, Ohio
- Prince George's County Memorial Library System, Prince George's County, Md.
- San Antonio Public Library, San Antonio, Texas
- Share Our Strength, Washington, D.C.
- Sitka Public Library, Sitka, Alaska
- Springfield City Library, Springfield, Mass.
- St. Charles City-County Library, St. Peters, Mo.
- Toledo Lucas County Public Library, Toledo, Ohio
- University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, N.C.
- Virginia Cooperative Extension

Advising Libraries:
- Ak-Chin Indian Community Library, Maricopa, Ariz.
- Richmond Public Library, Richmond, Ca.

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[1] For more information about the Libraries and Food Security Initiative, visit:
https://www.urbanlibraries.org/initiatives/libraries-and-food-security

The Crisis of Food Insecurity

For a community to be food secure, food must be accessible (physically and economically), affordable and nutritious. In the United States and Canada, a range of barriers exist between food access and food quality. Food access is tied closely to the population's income and purchasing power, leaving low-income communities at a tremendous disadvantage. Food access is also affected by geographic barriers including transportation infrastructure, walkability, proximity to quality food options, and access to vehicles and public transportation.

The enduring racial wealth divide in the U.S. economy shaped by systemic racism has profoundly impacted the food security of communities of color:

In 2021, Black households experienced food insecurity at 19.8%, with Latinx families at 16.2%, in contrast to the 7% white families experienced.[2]

Black households consistently have the highest rate of food insecurity in the United States, with an estimated 24% of the Black population experiencing food insecurity in 2020. Research has shown the higher poverty rate for Black Americans, a result of discriminatory policies and practices, increases the likelihood of experiencing hunger.

Lack of quality food access due to economic and geographic limitations impacts public health to a greater negative degree in communities of color. Individuals who face food insecurity have demonstrated "adverse social, physical and psychological outcomes." These outcomes range from diabetes and hypertension to behavioral challenges and developmental delays.

The 2022 U.S. infant formula shortage is one recent example of inequitable food access. University of Michigan Associate Professor of Nutritional Sciences, Kate Bauer, writes, "There's no question in my mind that the formula shortage is disproportionately impacting lower-income women, women of color and women in our urban and rural vs. suburban areas."[3]

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[2] *Hunger & Poverty in America*: https://frac.org/hunger-poverty-america
[3] *Baby formula shortages spell trouble for low-income families:* https://news.umich.edu/baby-formula-shortages-spell-trouble-for-low-income-families/

Values-Driven: Food is a Right

Librarianship, like all professions, is guided by core values and principles. Drawing on these values provides the "why" of the work and helps define the library's role in food security work.

- **Intellectual Freedom** - Libraries provide a wide array of resources and let people decide for
- themselves, free from judgment. Food should be provided in this manner.
- **Privacy** - People's bodies are their own; as are their choices in what to eat.
- **Human Dignity and Access for All** - Everyone deserves to eat. Food is a right.
- **Reliable Information** - Libraries provide education as a means to empowerment to encourage responsibility. Many libraries report providing an array of educational programming, from nutrition education to hands-on gardening workshops.
- **Community, Free and Open to All** - Everyone is worthy of having a place at the table: a place to belong.
- **Equity** - Libraries are growing in awareness about working with trusted messengers, working "with" rather than "for" people and providing culturally relevant food programming.
- **Commitment** - Libraries are listening and learning as they commit to this work.
- **Justice** - Libraries reported the belief they are in a place of reckoning, and that they need to be honest about where they are in order to continue to center human rights.

Words Matter

Libraries recognize the evolving nature of language, and the need to evolve with it. They reported being driven by equity and want to use words that feel inclusive, always growing the number of seats at the table.[4] Terms library leaders discussed included:

- Rather than referring to food deserts or using other "deficit" language, conveners chose to use **food justice,** a term that evokes hope and the power to change things.
- Conveners representing rural, indigenous, Black and Brown communities reported the word "healthy" sometimes carries a stigma and can feel judgmental and moralistic. The group chose to use **nourishing** instead.
- **Solidarity** rose as the preferred term to convey the relationship between those with food resources working alongside those in need to pursue food justice.
- Acknowledge **abundance.** Like information, there is plenty of food. No one in America should be hungry. The challenge is getting the food to those who need it.
- **Sovereignty** needs to be recognized, amplified and honored.

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[4] This is not new work to ULC: Trigger Terms: Harmful Detours and Healing Redirects is an award-winning resource created by the Anti-Racism Action Team.

How Libraries are Meeting the Need

Library food and nutrition programs are vast in scope and reach.

Library presence is significant in areas currently defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as having low food access, providing great opportunity for impact. 15% (2,547 locations) of the United States public library locations are located in food deserts. 18% (1,792 locations) of rural United States public library locations and 12% of urban United States public library locations are located in food deserts, as defined by the USDA and IMLS.[5, 6]

	Overall	Located in Food Deserts	% in Food Deserts
Total Library Locations	**17,496**	**2,674**	**15.28%**
Urban	**7,616**	**882**	**11.58%**
City	3,083	407	13.20%
Suburb	4,533	475	10.48%
Rural	**9,880**	**1,792**	**18.14%**
Town	3,519	968	27.51%
Rural	6,361	824	12.95%

MARYLAND

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY MEMORIAL LIBRARY SYSTEM

A ULC review of the "Free Summer Meals at Libraries for Prince George's County Youth" program hosted by eight libraries in Prince George's County, Md., annually, shows that an estimated 40,000 youth 18 years and younger within one-mile of the participating libraries gain access to quality food options and free summer meals.[7] In addition, the demographic breakdown of the population within a one-mile radius of the eight participating libraries includes 67% Black and 20% Latino or Hispanic residents. This emphasizes the importance of the equitable distribution of libraries as a tool for addressing community needs, especially in communities of color.

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[5] IMLS Public Library Survey: https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/public-libraries-survey
[6] USDA ERS Food Environment Atlas: https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas/
[7] *Libraries: Nourishing Children's Minds and Bodies*: https://www.urbanlibraries.org/blog/libraries-nourishing-childrens-minds-and-bodies

Libraries today are employing a range of programs and services to address barriers to food security in their communities. When asked about the programs they provide to create and support greater food outcomes, the top three most common responses by libraries were:[8]

Food Distribution for Youth
49%

Seed Libraries
36%

Food Distribution for Adults
30%
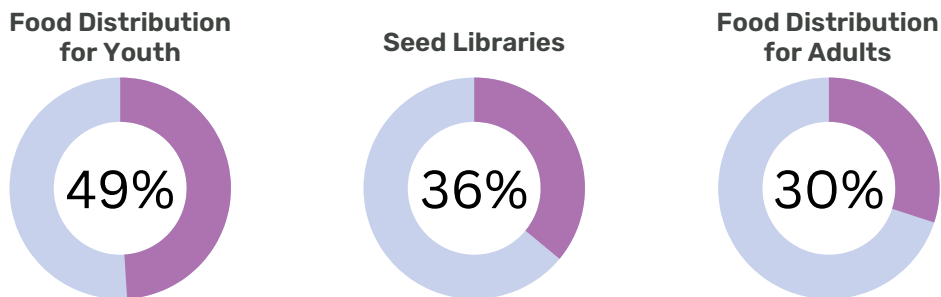
Less common responses were nutrition education counseling/instruction (30%), farmer's market presence/location (27%), community gardens (26%) and SNAP/WIC enrollment assistance (19%). Thirty-four percent of libraries indicated 'other.'

Libraries are driven by data and local public policy priorities.

Seventy-five percent of libraries indicated requests from municipalities and/or area nonprofits drove their decision to provide food access and educational programming and services. Fifty-seven percent reported that library values (mission, vision, etc.) drove the decision. Additional factors included requests from partners or local government agencies and funding.

Factors That Drove Libraries' Decision to Provide Food Programming and Services
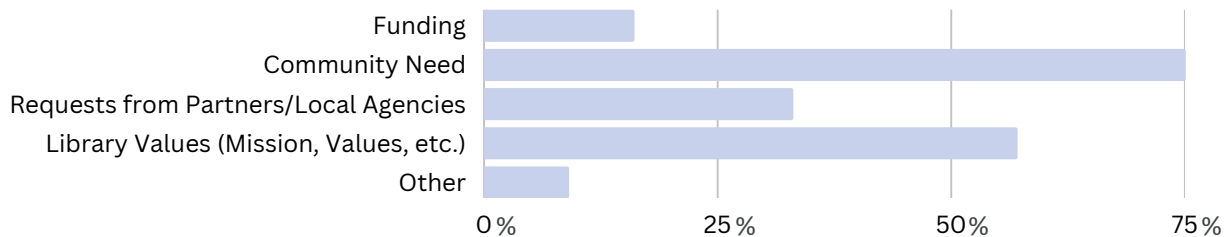
When asked how they identified what kind of programs and services to provide, libraries indicated requests from municipality and/or area nonprofits (39%), readily available data (38%) and community surveys and/or feedback (37%) as top factors at similar rates.

Factors That Drove Program and Service Type

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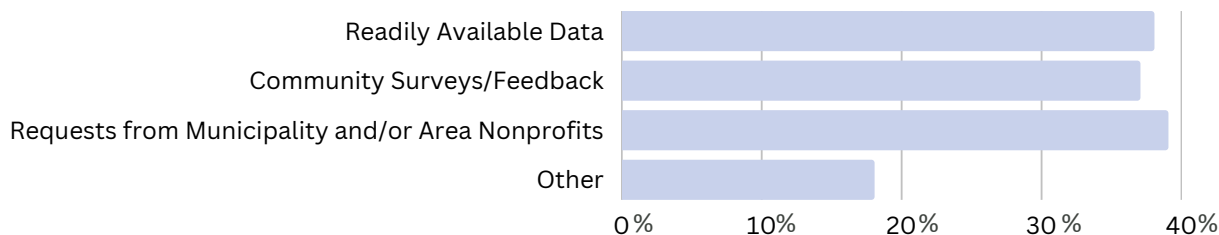
[8] The data presented throughout the rest of this section are based on a recent surveys of urban and rural libraries. Results reflect 73 urban library and 118 rural library responses. For more information, see the Methodology section (pg. 14).

Comparing Urban and Rural Libraries

Food insecurity rates, across various measures, tend to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas. In 2018, the USDA Household Food Security Report found that the food insecurity rate was 10.8% in urban areas compared with 12.7% in rural areas. Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap Report, however, based on 2018 data, found that only 13% of the U.S. counties with the highest food insecurity rates are urban while 87% are rural.

Food Programs and Services (Urban and Rural Library Comparison)

■ % of Urban Libraries   ■ % of Rural Libraries
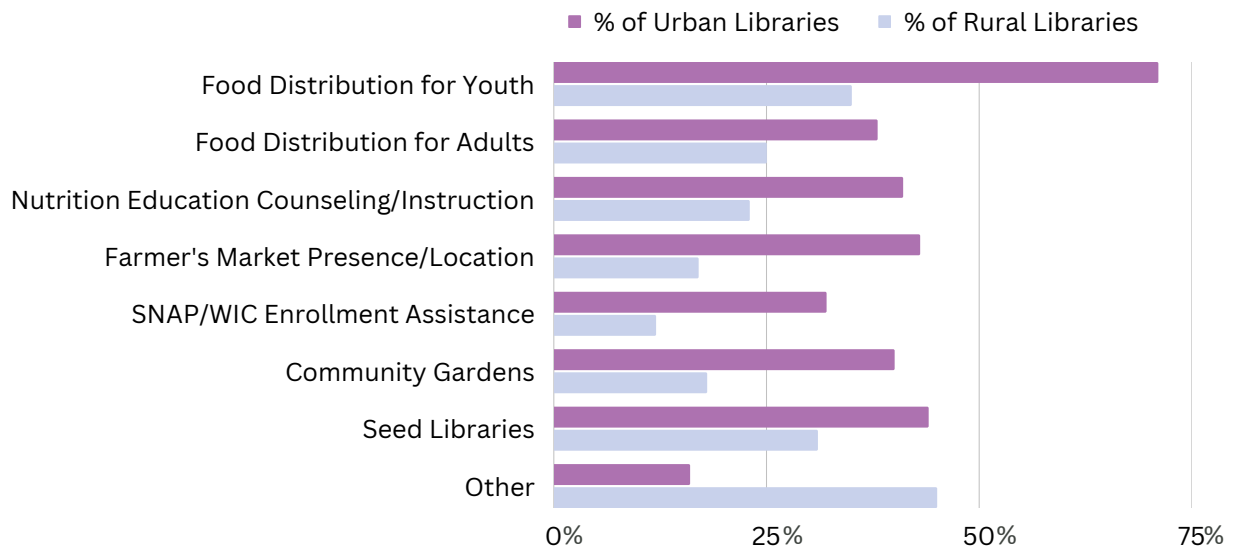
Libraries' food security activities vary between urban and rural communities, with rural libraries varying more widely overall. While food distribution was the top identified priority for all surveyed libraries, it was more prevalent in programming in urban libraries (71%) versus rural (35%). Farmer's market presence and SNAP/WIC enrollment assistance were less common among rural libraries than urban. Rural libraries were more likely to respond "other" and included fill-in responses such as little free pantries and programming for children and teens.

Challenges Facing Libraries

When asked about their greatest challenges in responding to the food-related needs of their community, 51% of libraries reported issues with staffing capacity. The second and third highest reported challenges were fundings (41%) and community awareness of programs and services (36%). Other reported challenges included identifying and working with partners (19%) and expertise (10%).

Among urban libraries, staffing capacity was not only reported as the greatest challenge (67%) by a large margin; the second-greatest challenge, funding, received a significantly lower response (34%). Among rural libraries, the top challenges received more consistent, and higher, response levels: 1) funding (46%); 2) staffing capacity (41%); and 3) community awareness of programs and services (40%). Only rural libraries were asked if service size was a key challenge, of which 11% indicated that it was.

Greatest Challenges Facing Libraries in Addressing Community Food Need

■ % of Urban Libraries   ■ % of Rural Libraries
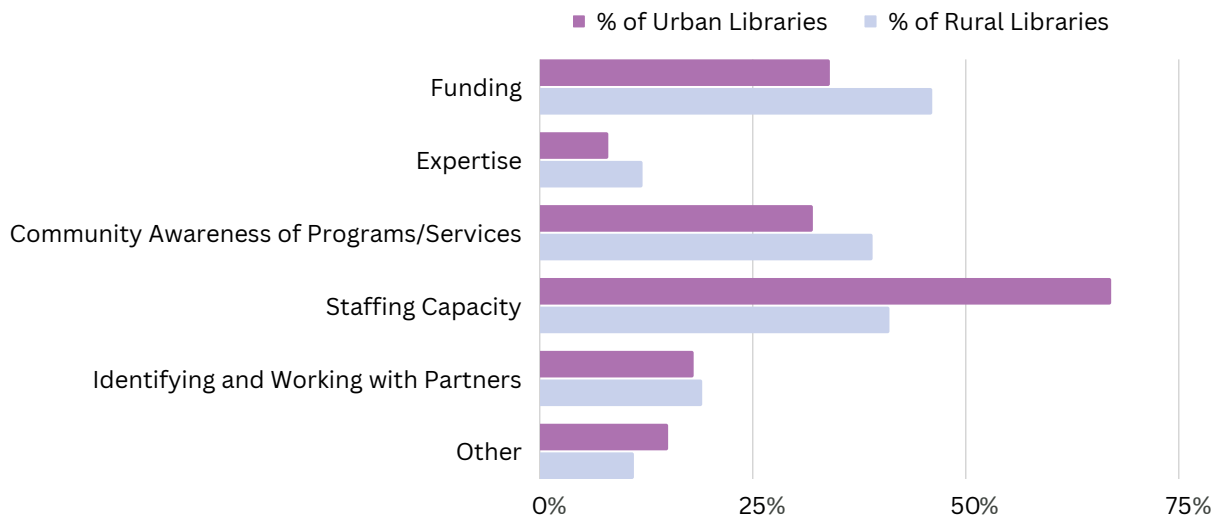
Libraries report many challenges one might expect, especially centered on drawing people to their locations and having enough monetary and staff resources. In addition, they report a need to ramp up outreach and community engagement efforts, something that requires training for staff unfamiliar with, and sometimes fearful of, going into new communities. Relationship building takes time, but is necessary for libraries to play a role in reducing the stigma often attached to food security programs. Libraries agreed stigmas are more easily overcome when working with youth, so many libraries build programs suited to youth audiences.

Easily accessible food sources, and staffing and budget constraints came up as consistent challenges for rural libraries, raising the need for regionalism as well as partnerships. Libraries expressed frustration that stakeholders are often interested in calculating a return on investment based on numbers of individuals in a community or accessibility to a library, which tends to be smaller in rural communities.

Anastasia Diamond-Ortiz, Director of Lorain Public Library System, sees her unique position as an opportunity to serve as a bridge between adjacent urban and rural library systems. She noticed a disconnect between resources and programs, and saw a need to have people with a high level of cultural competence involved. Over time, partnerships built synergistic connections with other anchors. "We need to think about this in a regional way. We're more well-resourced than rural partners but not as much as our closest urban library system. We must ask, what's our role and responsibility in supporting the whole, in supporting neighbors helping neighbors?"

> **"Kids are coming with MORE - more trauma, more hunger, more gaps to close. We've got to be there to work with our community."**
>
> *- Lauren Boeke, Assistant Youth Services Coordinator*
> *Toledo Lucas County Public Library*

1 Consider vetted library programs such as seed libraries, gardening and federal meal programs

Libraries have been supporting food security in their communities for decades, and certain programs have emerged as consistently successful and are often replicable.

Botetourt County Library in Virginia won a Virginia Association of Counties Award in 2018[9] recognizing their newly launched seed library. The library catalogs heirloom seeds and checks them out to patrons who agree to grow them within certain parameters, including bringing back harvested seeds. The library holds a plant sale to highlight plants grown through the program. Today, the library offers agricultural educational programming, and recently hired an agricultural specialist/educator as branch supervisor in their most agrarian location. Sitka Library launched a similar program in 2022. Aside from sharing information and providing food, the library hopes the program plays a part in building resilience.

RICHMOND PUBLIC LIBRARY

A librarian from Richmond Public Library (Calif.), earned his Consumer Health Designation through a program offered by Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM), enabling him to design high level programs geared toward his community.

CALIFORNIA

MASSACHUSETTS

SPRINGFIELD CITY LIBRARY

Springfield City Library (Mass.) offers an array of adult food-related classes, including a 413 Gourmet Club where participants come together to assist in making a recipe from a pre-selected cookbook.

Many public libraries serve as sites for the USDA afterschool and summer meal programs. Central Arkansas Library System's Be Mighty program provides afterschool and summer meals in Little Rock, funded through federal dollars and the Walmart Foundation, and in partnership with the National League of Cities and the Food Research and Action Center, among others. St. Charles City-County Library has run summertime Lunch @ the Library programs, where youth 18 and under may pick up lunch to take with them.

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[9] Submitted VACo Achievement Awards application: https://www.vaco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/BotetourtEagleRockSeedLibrary.pdf

② Pursue partnerships

Partnerships help libraries expand the breadth and depth of their food security programming. Sometimes libraries simply support a program by providing space or disseminating information about food pantries and SNAP programs; but often, they engage more fully in the programs. This may be by offering agricultural and nutrition information, serving as food and meal distribution centers, offering food preparation classes in professional kitchens housed in libraries, community gardens cared for by patrons, freedges, on-site take-as-you-go pantries, tool lending libraries to aid in home gardening and more.

Moab Library in Grand County, Utah, provides sack lunches six days a week; they also have a hydroponic garden on the library premises, and partner with a local organization called Youth Garden Project that educates the youth about growing healthy food. Director Carrie Valdes says:

> *"We have a finite number of resources. In a small, rural isolated community if you start fighting over resources, no one benefits. It's better to approach with synergy - how can we partner and share to benefit the community?"*

- Carrie Valdes, Director
Moab Library

WHAT IS A "FREEDGE?"

A growing number of libraries, including Charleston County Public Library (S.C.), are providing space for a freedge. A freedge, a type of community fridge, is a way to provide produce and other perishable items free to the community, enabling access to fresh nutritious foods.

VIRGINIA

ARLINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

In response to the Chair of the Arlington County Board of Supervisors identifying the priority of sustainability in 2019, Library Director Diane Kresh wanted to focus on food sustainability. A volunteer with Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) led the transformation of a green space to a community garden at the entrance of Central Library. Residents could borrow gardening tools from The Shed, an outgrowth of the garden, to support their own yard gardens. The Little Pantry, a give-what-you-have and take-what-you-need pantry in front of the garden, was built and maintained by Eagle Scouts. Food for Thought became the theme for the Arlington Reads author series.

Partnerships can grow in the most unexpected places, and many libraries reported the organic way they fell into great relationships that grew capacity for food security support. Examples:

- Local Food Policy Councils
- Food Banks
- Farmer's Markets
- Urban Gardens and Farms/Parks and Recreation
- Senior Centers
- Public Housing Authorities
- Homeless Shelters
- WIC (Women Infants and Children) Clinics
- Local Anchor Institutions (Hospitals, Schools and Universities)
- Extension Services
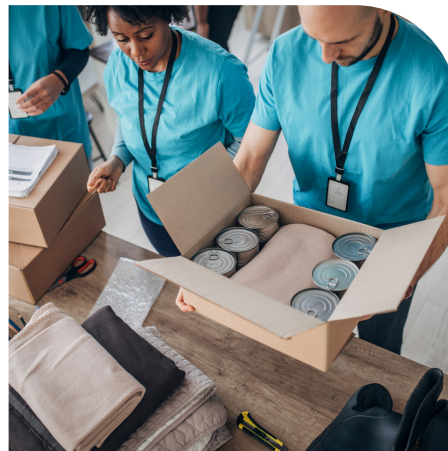
③ Engagement: Center equity & communities most in-need

Libraries can use readily-available data sources to identify communities of greatest need in their service area. This can be achieved through leveraging existing work and resources related to food security and food access done by local organizations, city governments and economic development agencies (e.g DC Food Policy Council) or collaborating directly with people in these organizations. The organization's resources usually present a clear picture of communities with the greatest need, as well as library locations that are best positioned to meet such needs.

Sources include:

- Local Open Data Platforms
- Food Access Reports from Local Planning Offices
- Economic Development Agencies

Libraries should also leverage the equity-centered community engagement strategies of existing programs already serving historically ignored communities. In an effort to reach Black and Brown youth in their direct service area where 27.7% of the population is Black,[10] Toledo Lucas County Public Library's free and reduced lunch is eligible to children through the federally-assisted National School Lunch Program (NSLP).[11]

ARIZONA

AK-CHIN INDIAN COMMUNITY LIBRARY
Ak-Chin Indian Community Library in Maricopa, Ariz. worked with University of Arizona Extension to provide education programs for youth. They host a weekly Tasty Crafts program "calling all young cooks" to learn cooking basics through preparing fun recipes.

10 U.S. Census Data: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/toledocityohio,lucascountyohio/PST045222
11 Many U.S. public libraries serve as meal sites for the NSLP: https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp

Libraries have the ability to continue to innovate in the food space and new program concepts are making an impact in local communities. Peer learning communities, such as ULC's Libraries and Food Security Initiative, allow for sharing and collection of best practices. As libraries leverage partnerships to ease general food distribution, seed libraries and community gardens, they often find capacity to seek out new partnerships to try new things.

Richland Library Main in Columbia, S.C. houses a cafe space that provides a dining experience for patrons while participating in Midland's entrepreneurial ecosystem by offering restaurateurs a low-risk opportunity to hone their skills running a brick-and-mortar restaurant. Toledo Lucas County Public Library hosts SAME (So All May Eat) Café Toledo, a nonprofit restaurant that serves healthy, mostly locally sourced organic food on a pay-what-you-are-able basis. The team worked with SAME to redesign the space built around a trauma-informed care aesthetic. People congregate at a long table, community members who may never interact otherwise, sharing meals.

NORTH CAROLINA

APPALACHIAN REGIONAL LIBRARY

Appalachian Regional Library belongs to Team Vittles, a cohort of fellow librarians in North Carolina interested in food programming, food insecurity, and hunger issues. They have partnered with Blue Ridge Women of Agriculture, N.C. Cooperative Extension and Lowe's Hardware to supply a free seed library for their patrons. They recently received funding to purchase a curriculum for Heritage Cooking Classes, an Edible Education Cooking Cart and a Community Fridge. During the height of the pandemic, the library partnered with the local Farmers Market to provide 'market bucks' families could cash in for free produce.

5 Empower participants

Libraries can work to ensure programs and services not only address immediate hunger needs but sow seeds of long-term security, such as gardening education that empowers residents to grow their own food. A librarian from Alexandria, Va., said the most successful programs must be at least three things: a grassroots effort, innovative and culturally relevant. The need to be culturally sensitive came up repeatedly from the group.

Lorain Public Library System hosts a branch program called Food & Fun where they engage children in hands-on programming to learn about nutrition and developed a recipe kit children use to make nutritious food at the library. Toledo Lucas County Public Library wanted to engage youth who need a place to go after school. The children receive meals and build relationships with the servers they see every day. They discuss nutrition, and teach children how to clean up after themselves and encourage pride in the community. The children do their homework, and are connected with their Tutor Smart, a program that is closing achievement gaps within two-to-five months.

San Antonio Public Library, in addition to an array of programs, provides a variety of guides filled with reliable information vetted by library staff, including Food Safety in a Power Outage, Welcome to Cooking, Farm to Work, Learn to Cook and Freshest Foods.

> *"We nourish mind and spirit so it seems logical to nurture their bodies too."*
>
> *– Jason Kucsma, Library Director*
> *Toledo Lucas County Public Library*

Conclusion: Pathways to the Future

Even with all of the success stories, libraries reported the desire to learn more, do more and engage more, to see more food justice in America.

One convener realized, despite the massive number of food programs, the library had been overlooked when the municipality created a Food Security group, signifying a need to continue to communicate across counties and cities, as well as with outside partners. Long-term solutions depend on long-term power sharing, so this experience serves as a good reminder that having a voice needs to be an ongoing pursuit.

Partnerships are critical to make these programs work, but perhaps even more, a regional approach may be necessary for sustainability. Rural and small libraries would benefit immensely from consistent support from larger urban systems. Libraries would also benefit when they remember who they are and serve as pathways to so much else the local library offers: literacy programs, use of computers to learn about SNAP and WIC programs or to build a resume or apply or interview for a job, workforce and economic development programs, encouragement toward entrepreneurship, online education courses, and civic engagement programs where patrons learn how to be their own best advocates. Then justice, food and otherwise, can be realized.

Methodology

This white paper brings together data from 1) a survey of ULC and Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) member libraries; 2) outcomes of a convening of 22 U.S. library leaders and experts from December 7-9, 2022; and 3) stories from ULC's four action teams: Economic Opportunity, Anti-Racism, Partnering with Schools and Digital Equity.

The survey received 191 total responses from 73 urban library systems and 118 rural library systems across the U.S. and Canada.

This report defines urban library systems as ULC member libraries and rural libraries as ARSL member libraries.

Walmart ⋗⋖ org

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.