FOOD ACCESS & TRANSPORTATION

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

JANUARY 2019

South King County
MOBILITY COALITION

hopelink
Executive Summary

This is an assessment of the transportation barriers South King County residents face in accessing food retailers and food banks. The South King County Mobility Coalition—a group consisting of human service agencies, transportation providers, and city employees—identified accessing transportation to the area’s food banks as a major concern that needed further study.

Through a survey, interviews with subject matter experts, and a review of related literature, this document explores those equity concerns. Restrictions in access to food banks created an equity concern with mode of transportation taken into consideration—clients with access to a vehicle are able to secure significantly more food than those taking the bus or those that walk to a food bank. However, in many cases, owning a personal vehicle is neither possible or sustainable. People reliant on public transportation face:

- Longer travel times, threatening the freshness of food;
- Limitations on carry capacity;
- Decreased reliability due to changes in routes;
- and, Food Insecurity

The goal of the project is to create awareness of the equity concern and the challenges faced by food bank patrons; and to help inform solutions in addressing these concerns. We hope this assessment will highlight the importance of access to food retailers and food banks for populations with special transportation needs and assist research on potential solutions.

Keywords: Food Access, food insecure, transit access, food deserts, and transportation
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Background of Food Insecurity and Food Access

The accessibility of fresh foods has an unquestionable effect on health and quality of life. But for underserved populations, transportation barriers pose a risk to acquiring food that provides, not just nourishment, but peace of mind as well. People rely on public transportation and alternative transportation for many reasons; often a disability, or income level prevents personal vehicle ownership, creating reliance on a system that’s designed to transport people, not the things they carry. This dependence on a transportation system not designed for such a use negatively impacts access to one of the most basic needs in life: food.

Gaps in the public transportation system create additional challenges for underserved individuals in accessing food. The term “Food Desert” is common parlance, and while the definition may fluctuate, what it boils down to is a geographic location that lacks food retailers supplying affordable, fresh, and healthy foods. In many assessments of food access, distances of one-quarter to three-quarters of a mile are considered reasonable for walkability. But when looked at through a lens of equity, availability of food retailers and the distance to them should not be the sole factor in determining accessibility.

South King County is an area that well represents the issue of food access and transportation, particularly surrounding the area’s food banks. According to the 2018 Map the Meal Gap from Feeding America, over 60% of South King County residents live at or below 200% poverty level, qualifying them for Federal Nutrition Assistance. The South King County Food Coalition notes that a large portion of the clients served by the area’s food banks are low-income households, many of whom are headed by single-parent families. When a single income source doesn’t cover basic necessities and childcare, the parent must work multiple jobs to make ends meet and relies on food bank services to reduce food costs.

Food Access may appear straightforward, but what kind of food do we mean? In an article published by the USDA, a family’s access to food is evaluated based on the volume and type of food retailers near their home or workplace, combined with the availability of transportation (Mabil & Jones, 2012). And as noted by the South King County Food Access Workgroup, “It’s not
truly accessible if it’s not on a bus line.” There’s a difference between a supermarket stocked with fresh produce and proteins, a corner market with nothing but prepackaged and processed foods, and food banks that are designed for temporary food assistance at no cost to the consumer. As areas in South King County gentrify, high-end supermarkets are close in proximity, but the cost of the food itself acts as a barrier to low-income families.

Type of food available is another concern with food banks. South King County has a diverse demographic range with many cultural necessities surrounding food. Food Innovation Network in South King County works with Somali, Ethiopian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Latina, Congolese, Nepali, and Burmese communities. Often, culturally appropriate food is not available from food banks. The Tukwila Food Pantry reports that it is common among newly arrived refugee and immigrant populations to walk as a primary form of travel. In many cases, this limits food options to a 7-11 or gas station as the closest food source. The cost of food at such retailers increases almost double from what could be found at a standard grocery store.

Availability of food retailers only paints part of the picture and does not capture the greater risk that those with special transportation needs face: food insecurity. Using metrics established by the USDA to determine a household’s food insecurity, data is collected via an 18-item questionnaire distributed through the Current Population Survey that the Census Bureau administers. Data collected from this food insecurity questionnaire is unique in that it does not relate to income or poverty level. According to the most recent census in 2010, South King County held the highest percentage of food insecure residents in the county and was above the state average with 16% of respondents reporting being food insecure.

Food insecurity is an insidious influencer of both physical and mental health that disproportionally impacts vulnerable and at-risk populations (Salzer & Joslin, 2017). It is a sustained lack of access to food that negatively impacts a person’s physical and mental condition. And for survivors of food insecurity, long term effects of these experiences are part of CDC-Kaiser Permanente’s ongoing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study which examines the link between harmful childhood experiences and adult health and behavior. The higher the ACE score, the greater chance of heart disease, alcohol and drug abuse, financial stress, poor academic
achievement and other violent outcomes (CDC). One of the questions ACE study participants answer asks if there was enough food to eat while growing up, demonstrating the direct impact food security has on an individual and their community.

Unfortunately, reliance upon food banks is on the rise. Every four years, Feeding America conducts usage surveys/analysis of food banks and pantries across the United States. In 2006, they counted 25 million families served. In 2010, that number rose to 37 million served. And, as of the last completed survey, 2014, 46.5 million unique households across the nation received assistance from food banks. That’s an increase of 86% over the course of 9 years. That number does include a wider scope for the 2014 survey, according to the report. However, the findings still support qualitative statements about an increase in food bank usage. And not only is there an increased number of people receiving emergency food assistance, the 2014 Feeding America study found that 63% of households surveyed include charitable donation in their monthly budget for food. This behavior indicates a high percentage of food insecurity as well as reliance on a system meant to be a stop-gap measure.

According to interviewed subject matter experts, many South King County food banks have seen a decrease in clients served, despite an overall national rise of food bank usage. Though there are many potential factors for this local decrease, two common concerns were expressed: housing costs rising, driving low-income families further south; and a growing fear around immigration status and using food bank services due to proposed changes to the Public Charge rule. One interviewee noted that it is common, particularly among newly arrived refugees, to see a location shift as they settle into more permanent housing. It was also supposed that as the economy improved, and employment rates rose there was more financial stability in the areas served.

The greatest issue centers on transporting the food itself. Those riding public transit and walking are limited to what they can carry. It was also reported that some shuttle services restrict the number of bags a rider can bring aboard with them. Though food bank patrons get creative with how they transport their produce—some pack their goods into wheeled luggage—keeping meat fresh and safe to consume becomes a concern with extended bus trips. More than 10% of
South King County food bank survey respondents reported trip lengths exceeding thirty minutes, and some travel as much as ninety minutes to reach the food bank.

Transporting food also poses the greatest equity issue for food bank clients. At the Tukwila Food Pantry, a patron taking full advantage of the options available during their twice monthly trips would have access to 200 pounds of food. However, a person traveling by bus or bike would be physically unable to carry that amount. As Mike Werle with the Highline Food Bank stated, “Those with cars can carry much more.”

A study conducted of the Tampa Bay area found that the prevalence of automobiles as a means of transportation directly influences the area’s built environment (Salzer and Joslin, 2017). Suburban development is designed for people with personal vehicles, resulting in large blocks and neighborhoods with low connectivity. For example, there could be a bus stop within the quarter mile walkshed to technically qualify the location as accessible. However, that stop could be on the opposite side of a multi-lane highway with limited pedestrian access. These pose as barriers for transit riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

The cost of vehicle ownership is another barrier. The 2014 Feeding America study found that 66.5% of survey respondents, within the previous 12 months, had to choose between paying for food and paying for transportation. During a 2018 listening session with people experiencing homelessness in Downtown Seattle, Hopelink staff learned that attendees would choose paying for necessities—such as food and shelter--over paying the bus fare to go get groceries. Affordable, or even no cost transportation options to food is essential for populations on very limited or no income.

From articles reviewed, food desert research tends to focus on proximity of food sources, with the assumption that increasing proximity and improving available food retailers will provide residents with the healthy and affordable food options they require. The outcome of such research focuses on creating and expanding food retail options, an approach that may be useful in rural areas.

However, in many urban areas new research suggests that the availability of food retailers may not well represent the entire problem. One such study in Washington State found that,
though imbalances among socioeconomic and racial/ethnic nutrition related outcomes exist, there was not enough evidence to directly relate the availability of WIC certified healthy food retailers and food insecurity. The study found that it wasn’t the proximity of the store that was the problem, but lack of access to a personal vehicle (McDermot, Igoe and Stahre, 2017).

A community food system assessment conducted in Buffalo, NY examined not only transit maps and vehicle ownership rates among residents, but also held focus groups with community members. Through those discussions, they found that seniors in the area would be more likely to walk to the corner grocery store rather than take the bus to a larger, cost-conscious and preferred grocery store. Though the food was more expensive, the group cited “proximity and transportation cost savings” as the reason for the decision (Martin and Morales, 2015).

The lens of equity as it relates to food access must look at a wider scope. A person with a car will always be able to carry more food than a person reliant on public transportation. Food banks/pantries often have restrictive measures in place, such as limiting the number of times a client may access the food bank per month. While this allows the food bank to serve as many clients as possible, a person limited to what they can carry and when they can go is at a disadvantage to a person with a vehicle. Their needs are the same but their ability to meet them are not.

Nevertheless, personal vehicle ownership is not the preferred solution. Owning a vehicle adds increased financial burden and stress for low income individuals and families. For low-income families, after housing, transportation is the second highest cost to monthly finances (Roberto, 2008). Cost of vehicle maintenance and fuel further increase hardships. Other demographics may be unable to operate a personal vehicle, such as people who are blind or individuals with low-vision. Lastly, a rise in vehicle miles traveled will lead to an abundance of unintended consequences, including greater greenhouse gas emissions and reduced air quality, traffic congestion, and further dependency on one sole mobility option for individuals.

Car ownership presents additional challenges for clients of food banks. The cost of gas used to get to food sources can increase financial strain on a family. Additionally, many low-income individuals do not have flexibility in their budget to keep vehicles in good repair. When a
vehicle breaks down, clients must wait for a friend or family to drive them and face food insecurity until the vehicle can be repaired. Several food bank coordinators noted that clients would need their car jump-started in the parking lot or request money for gas.

Options are limited for low-cost, transportation alternatives. Traditionally, volunteer driver programs focused specifically on medical appointments, providing services for seniors and those with disabilities only. This type of service has shifted eligibility in recent years, though are still limited in capacity and scope for populations served. Catholic Community Services’ volunteer transportation program prioritizes medical appointments and trips to the grocery store as “essential trips”. Sound Generations, whose volunteer driver program previously only served trips to medical appointments, launched a pilot program in 2018 called Driving Companion Program, wherein clients can self-select their volunteer drivers within their personal network (friends, family, neighbors), and their driver receives mileage reimbursement for driving seniors to events, appointments, shopping, etc. This allows flexibility in the destination type based on need while older adults gain mobility options and remain connected to their communities.

Another potential transportation alternative type is shuttle or paratransit services. Access Transportation, run by King County Metro, is available for individuals who cannot use fixed route public transit. Since this service is comparable to public transit, it can be a shared ride and may take longer than door-to-door service. This may be prohibitive for grocery shopping and travelling with perishable items. For many food banks, a client is granted a specific time they’re allowed access to the pantry and “open” hours of the food bank are limited. Those using Access are often given pick-up windows that can add several hours to their food bank trip, often resulting in an entire day spent acquiring food. There is also difficulty in scheduling a return ride, as clients are unsure of the length of time needed at the food bank. If their Access van arrives before they’re finished, they must choose between getting home and getting food.

Another similar service in King County is Hyde Shuttles, operated by Sound Generations. Hyde Shuttles provide round-trip van transportation to hot lunches, senior centers, grocery shopping, and other local errands for seniors 55 years of age and older, and people with disabilities of all ages. Hyde Shuttles operate within specific neighborhoods and are made for
local travel. In the 2018 Food Bank Survey, less than 1% of respondents indicated they took either Hyde Shuttle or Access to the food bank. While Hyde Shuttle is widely popular, the service only serves older adults and people with disabilities and has limited capacity, resulting in an increased denial rate. This situation makes it difficult for community members to rely on the service for essential needs like trips to food banks.

Decision makers need data. Specific needs of a community cannot be met unless those needs are identified. It is vital when evaluating an area’s food security to factor in transportation barriers. When the healthcare industry focused on a patient’s need for reliable transportation to medical appointments they saw improvements in patient health and costs to the system. A first of its kind study commissioned by the Medical Transportation Access Coalition examined Non-Emergent Medical Transportation’s (NEMT) return on investment. The study found that NEMT as part of a care management strategy resulted in a positive return of over $40 million per month for every 30,000 Medicaid beneficiaries (Adelberg, Salber, Pruisner, Cohen, and Dobosenski, 2018). The realm of food access, particularly as proper nutrition relates to public health, is primed for a similar shift.

In Baltimore, thanks to a partnership with the city and Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future, a comprehensive food map was generated which discovered that 25% of Baltimore residents with a low median income lived at least one quarter mile away from a grocery store and did not have access to a vehicle. It was this discovery that led to a decision by the city to offer tax credits to food retailers that opened in or near designated food desert areas. By modifying building code and policy, the City also allowed less-permanent greenhouses known as hoop houses to be built, providing an increase in locally sourced produce (Delgadillo, 2017).

Food insecurity has lasting repercussions on individuals and society. And though more is being done to improve the availability of food, improving access to food, especially food banks, is an area in need of research and improvement. Census data from Federal Way finds 21% of residents living with food insecurity and over 20% without access to a car. Solutions need to be found to bridge gaps in an infrastructure that will provide for needs left unmet by public transportation. And many cities are looking for those solutions through mobile markets, grocery
delivery services, and investing in transportation options that accommodate people and the parcels they carry.

Being able to access healthy and culturally appropriate food is vital to the wellness of South King County residents. Those living in poverty in the surveyed areas ranged from 12-20% and many areas face transportation challenges, such as the City of Kent in which over 40% of households are underserved by transit. As the survey and interviews demonstrate, transportation poses a significant burden and barrier as vulnerable populations seek to access this basic human necessity. It’s time for the paradigm surrounding Food Desert analysis to include transportation. Unless transportation equity issues are addressed—particularly for patrons of food banks—a region’s access to food and health is not truly improved.

Public transit is the most cost-effective solution making it a logical place to focus in addressing barriers to food access. Through programs like King County Metro’s Community Connections, community members and stakeholders have the opportunity to prioritize accessible transit solutions for food access. It is recommended for transportation and healthcare stakeholders to participate in conversations and engage with transit agencies. Financial analysis could emphasize to food retailers the benefit of working with communities to improve access to their storefronts.

True assessments can provide a rich source of data to shape future policy decisions and shape the region’s transit and health future. There’s no one-size-fits-all to the solution of food access and it’s important for communities and local governments to know the resources and needs present to best shape their approach to solutions.
Potential Solutions

Closing the First Mile/Last Mile Gap

King County Metro’s DART (Demand Area Response Transit) buses offer a deviated fixed route that could allow for people to be picked up and dropped off at or closer to their destination. With a focus on advocacy and inclusion for food access needs, routes could be planned to connect low-income housing sites to grocery stores or food banks. With the ability to use reduced fare ORCA LIFT cards, this would provide a low-cost option for people to transport themselves and their groceries home. A similar service in Kent, known as the Kent Shopper Shuttle, is widely popular as the route specifically stops at multiple senior housing sites and food/shopping centers. The cost to ride the service is free.

Carpool Without Owning a Car

Carsharing programs are abundant in urban areas. Companies like ReachNow, LimePod, and Car2Go provide the opportunity for families and neighbors to make use of a personal vehicle without the financial burden of car ownership. Costs could be shared by riders and allow for less frequent trips to the store or food bank. In the 2018 SKC Food Bank Survey, 70% of respondents drove alone to the food bank whereas 15% carpooled. This number could be increased through proper incentives and increased availability and awareness of informal and formal carpooling options. The food banks that require a set appointment time could also revisit policies that would allow neighbors or carpooling members to have the same appointment.

Shuttles and Community Vans

Programs like the Hyde Shuttles offer solutions for older adults. With infrastructure in place, those programs could be adapted to serve King County Housing Authority sites or low-income neighborhoods with scheduled times for a group ride to SNAP/EBT accessible local grocery stores, for all ages of community members. Community Vans through King County Metro is a rideshare pilot program designated to provide residents with customized options for getting around when bus services can’t meet their needs. Areas identified as Food Deserts would make ideal locations for these programs.
**Autonomous Food Delivery**

In several cities across the United States, pilot and test program are running using self-driving vehicles for food delivery. In Scottsdale, Arizona, Kroger has partnered with Nuro to test the usage of grocery delivery via autonomous vehicles. This model allows for users to make their own food choices and alleviates the burden of transporting the weight of the food. Coordinated efforts with Housing Authority sites could pave the way for residents to reclaim agency in their food security.

**Partnerships with Transportation Network Companies**

Ubiquitous and universal, TNCs like Uber and Lyft provide an attractive solution to the barriers facing food access—except for being cost-accessible. With a demonstrated need of the importance of food access, programs like Uber’s Community Impact Initiative would offer the opportunity for non-profits and human service agencies to connect their clients with Uber’s services at no or low cost to the client. Wheelchair taxis could also supplement this type of program for those needing wheelchair-accessible vehicles.
Appendix

References

K. Salzer, A. Joslin. “Travel to Food: Transportation Barriers for the Food Insecure in Tampa Bay” University of South Florida, September 2017


South King County Food Bank Survey

Methodology

From November 2017 through March 2018, a survey was administered to food banks across South King County. Participants completed this survey during their regular food bank visits. The goal of the transportation survey was to measure food bank usage and access in South King County. Participants were asked ten questions related to where they lived, how frequently they used the food bank as well as how they arrived at the food bank. The survey was available in six languages: English, Spanish, Somali, Arabic, Mandarin, and Vietnamese. In total, 589 surveys were collected from eight food banks in South King County.

Respondents mostly lived throughout South King County. Matching the sample’s heavy participation by the Des Moines food bank, many lived in the Burien and Des Moines areas. Also, a heavy concentration of those living along the SR 167 corridor. Smaller numbers of people lived in North Pierce County communities, along with several who lived in rural/exurban King County communities. Survey results were returned in both English and Spanish with no participation from other languages.

Surveys were administered by food bank staff and Hopelink employees at targeted outreach events. Due to the delivery method, responses are limited to people attending the food bank and data could not be captured from those eligible but not able to patron the food bank.
Food Bank Transportation Survey

1. What zip code do you live in? ________________

2. Have you moved in the last 6 months? □ Yes □ No
   If yes, what zip code did you move from? ________________

3. Which Food Bank do you use most often? ________________

4. How did you hear about the Food Bank?
   □ Flyer □ Table event □ Word of mouth □ Other ________

5. What percentage of your groceries comes from the Food Bank?
   □ All □ Most, but not all □ Some, but not most □ Very little

6. What type of housing do you live in?
   □ Apartment □ Rent house □ Own house □ Family/Friend’s place
   □ Homeless

7. Why do you come to THIS Food Bank? (Check all that apply.)
   □ It’s the closest □ It’s the one I know about
   □ It’s easiest to get to □ Works with my schedule
   □ Other ________________

8. How did you get here today? (Check all that apply)
   □ Bus/Transit □ Personal Vehicle □ Bike □ Walk
   □ Carpool □ Hyde Shuttle □ Access □ Other ________

9. How long did it take to get here today?
   □ 0-30 min □ 30-60 min □ 60-90 min □ Over 90 min

10. What would make it easier for you to get to the Food Bank?
    ____________________________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________________________
"Consumer choices about food spending and diet are likely to be influenced by the accessibility and affordability of food retailers—travel time to shopping, availability of healthy foods, and food prices. Some people and places, especially those with low income, may face greater barriers in accessing healthy and affordable food retailers, which may negatively affect diet and food security."

- USDA

**WHAT IS FOOD ACCESS?**

**HOW IT EFFECTS SOUTH KING COUNTY**

South King County has seen a tremendous growth in low income residents. The number of school age children living in families experiencing poverty has risen 21% since 1995 to over 18,700 children.

Conversely, the number of SNAP-authorized stores per 1,000 people has decreased in King County by 7% since 2012.

**Distribution of School Age Poverty in King County - 2015**

- E. King County: 13%
- N. King County: 6%
- Seattle: 21%
- S. King County: 60%

Source: APDE Public Health, Seattle & King County, 02/2018

(USDA Food Environment Atlas)
From November 2017 through March 2018 a survey was administered to food banks across South King County. Participants completed this survey during their regular food bank visits. The goal of the transportation survey was to measure food bank usage and access in South King County. Participants were asked ten questions relating to food bank access. In total, 589 surveys were collected from 8 food banks across South King County.

**THE SURVEY**

- WHAT ZIP CODE DO YOU LIVE IN?
- HAVE YOU MOVED IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?
- WHICH FOOD BANK DO YOU USE MOST OFTEN?
- HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE FOOD BANK?
- WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR GROCERIES COMES FROM THE FOOD BANK?
- WHAT TYPE OF HOUSING DO YOU LIVE IN?
- WHY DO YOU COME TO THIS FOOD BANK?
- HOW DID YOU GET HERE TODAY?
- HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO GET HERE TODAY?
- WHAT WOULD MAKE IT EASIER TO GET TO THE FOOD BANK?

Respondents mostly lived throughout South King County. Matching the samples' heavy participation by Des Moines food bank, many lived in the Burien/Des Moines area. Also a heavy concentration of those living along the SR 167 corridor. Smaller numbers of people lived in North Pierce County along with several living in rural/exurban King County Communities.

**FOOD BANKS SURVEYED**

- DES MOINES 286/49%
- MAPLE VALLEY 111/19%
- HIGHLINE 70/12%
- FEDERAL WAY 50/9%
- TUKWILA 46/8%
- KENT 13/2%
- AUBURN 9/2%
- WHITE CENTER 4/1%

*PERCENTAGES MAY NOT TOTAL 100 DUE TO ROUNDING*
"HOW DID YOU GET HERE TODAY?"

Use of a personal vehicle was the most common response—70% of respondents drove themselves while 15% carpooled.

Less than 1% of respondents listed Access or the Hyde Shuttle.

85% of food bank clients used a personal vehicle.

10% of food bank clients used public transportation.

7% of food bank clients walked.

1% of food bank clients biked.
"How long did it take you to get here?"

Time and distance to travel are considerations in determining areas of Food Deserts as well as showcasing travel impacts.

- **89%** 0-30 MIN
- **9%** 30-60 MIN
- **2%** 60-90 MIN
- **<1%** 90+ MIN
"How did you hear about the food bank?"

- **Word of Mouth**: 60%
- **Flyer or Tabling Event**: 4%
- **Internet Search**:
  - DSHS
  - Walk-in
  - Church
  - School
- **Other**: 35%
"What portion of your groceries come from the food bank?"

- Some, but not most: 43%
- Most, but not all: 40%
- All: 11%
- Very few: 6%
"WHAT WOULD MAKE IT EASIER TO GET TO THE FOOD BANK?"

This open-ended question gave participants the freedom to respond how they wanted and examined general access to food bank services.

Transportation to and from the facility was the biggest concern shared by the sample. More frequent bus service, a specialized shuttle for the food bank, and gas assistance were frequently cited solutions by respondents. There were also concerns about the location of food banks, the need for longer operating hours, and the availability of parking.

"HAVE YOU MOVED IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?"

Of those surveyed, 11% stated they had moved in the last six months, primarily from Seattle. A large portion of food bank clients reported living in rental arrangements--40% in apartments and 25% in home rental.
Census Data from Surveyed Cities

Des Moines

Figure 1 - Census Tract 289.01 - Des Moines

Population: 31,238
Living in Poverty: 12%
Food Insecurity: 26%
Households with no vehicle: 5%
Unemployment rate: 7%
Households underserved by transit: 21.6%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)

Tukwila

Figure 2 - Census Tract 273 - SeaTac, Tukwila

Population: 20,144
Living in Poverty: 21.2%
Food Insecurity: 20%
Households with no vehicle: 10%
Unemployment rate: 9%
Households underserved by transit: 34.4%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)
Kent

Population: 128,458
Living in Poverty: 14.8%
Food Insecurity: 16%
Households with no vehicle: 19%
Unemployment rate: 4%
Households underserved by transit: 41.4%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)

Figure 3 - Census Tract 292.03 – Kent

White Center

Population: 15,300
Living in Poverty: 19.7%
Food Insecurity: 31%
Households with no vehicle: 11%
Unemployment rate: 5%
Households underserved by transit: 22.3%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)

Figure 4 - Census Tract 268.02 - White Center
Auburn

Population: 80,776
Living in Poverty: 13.6%
Food Insecurity: 16%
Households with no vehicle: 11%
Unemployment rate: 9%
Households underserved by transit: 29.5%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)

Federal Way

Population: 96,690
Living in Poverty: 12.3%
Food Insecurity: 21%
Households with no vehicle: 21%
Unemployment rate: 4%
Households underserved by transit: 21.7%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)
Burien (Highline)

Figure 7 - Census Tract 285 – Highline

Population: 51,671
Living in Poverty: 15.2%
Food Insecurity: 24%
Households with no vehicle: 7%
Unemployment rate: 3%
Households underserved by transit: 36.2%

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)

Maple Valley

Figure 8 - Census Tract 320.02 - Maple Valley

Population: 25,758
Living in Poverty: 4.5%
Food Insecurity: 9%
Households with no vehicle: 3%
Unemployment rate: 1%
Households underserved by transit: No data due to insufficient transit markers

(source: census.gov, Opportunity 360, AllTransit)
Stakeholder Interviews

To support and expand upon the data gathered through the surveys, several interviews were conducted with subject matter experts. Those interviewed included:

- Barb Shimuzu, Des Moines Area Food Bank
- Kara Martin, Food Innovation Network
- Mike Werle, Highline Food Bank
- Kathy Finau, Tukwila Food Pantry (former)
- Maggie Rickman, South King County Food Coalition
- Cain Buckler, Hopelink Food Bank Bellevue
- Adria Briehl, Catholic Community Services

The interviews explored transportation challenges faced across South King County and covered a wide variety of populations served. Many of the interviewees discussed the various challenges faced and one quote best states the findings:

“Those with cars can carry much more.”
Mike Werle, Highline Food Bank

Of the populations served by the agencies interviewed, most common is people experiencing homelessness, followed by English language learners and low-income families. Other common populations are older adults (55 years and older), newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and people with disabilities. Of the organizations interviewed, a range of 20 to over 50% of clients were over the age of 55. Patrons of food banks tend to reflect the demographics of the cities served. Some interviewees noted that they had seen an increase in people temporarily unemployed as well as low-income families that work full time.

Many South King County food banks have seen a decrease in clients served, despite an overall national rise of food bank usage. Though there are many potential factors for this local decrease, two common concerns were expressed: housing costs rising, which drives low-income families further south and a growing fear around immigration status and using food bank services due to proposed changes to the Public Charge rule. One interviewee noted that it is common, particularly among newly arrived refugees, to see a location shift as they settle into more

Those with cars can carry much more.”
Mike Werle, Highline Food Bank
permanent housing. It was also supposed that as the economy improved, and employment rates rose there was more financial stability in the areas served.

All the organizations interviewed agreed that transportation poses a significant barrier to accessing food and food bank services. Problems commonly listed with public transportation included infrequent bus service or an excessive number of transfers to reach locations. The challenge of transporting the weight of the food poses a significant equity issue. To get to any of the food banks, a car is a necessity, however parking is limited or non-existent at many food banks.

Volunteer driver programs are commonly used by older adults for trips to and from the grocery store. However, volunteer transportation can be difficult to secure, and many programs prioritize or exclusively offer trips for medical purposes.

South King County has a diverse demographic range with many cultural necessities surrounding food. Many times, culturally appropriate food is not available. It is also common among newly arrived refugee and immigrant populations to walk as a primary form of travel. Often this limits food options to a 7-11 or gas station as the closest food source. The cost of food at such retailers increases almost double from what could be found at a standard grocery store.

The greatest issue centers on transporting the food itself. Those riding public transit and walking are limited to what they can carry. Some shuttle services also restrict the number of bags a rider is able to bring aboard with them.

Some food banks offer home delivery options, though the scope is often limited to people unable to leave their home and clients are not able to select what food they receive. This presents a challenge in providing culturally appropriate food as well as accommodating medical dietary restrictions.

“On average, if a patron took advantage of all the options available they would walk away with 200 pounds of food. However, they can’t bring that much if they don’t have access to a car.”

Kathy Finau, Tukwila Food Pantry
Clients that use public transportation will frequently remove shopping carts from the food bank site to assist in carrying the goods to a bus stop. However, the carts are then abandoned and frequently not recovered, adding financial strain to the food banks. In some cities, businesses can be charged a fine for abandoned shopping carts.

The most common mode of transportation used by the populations served is a car—most often used to carpool several family members or neighbors in cases of people living in King County Housing Authority sites. Trips are often arranged via word of mouth among family members. Smaller percentages of each group list clients using bus or walking, while one group indicated that buses were not convenient for their clients and not heavily used.

Car ownership presents additional challenges for clients of food banks. The cost of gas used to get to food sources can increase financial strain on a family. Additionally, many low-income individuals do not have flexibility in their budget to keep vehicles in good repair. When a vehicle breaks down, clients must wait for a friend or family to drive them and face food insecurity until the vehicle can be repaired. Several food bank coordinators noted that clients would need their car jump started in the parking lot or request money for gas.

Food bank visits are also variable in length, and many bus routes offer reduced service during midday hours forces clients to face lost wages due to time committed to transportation. The uncertainty in timing adds challenges to those using paratransit services where trips must be scheduled ahead of time, often resulting in a disproportionate amount of time invested in securing food.

In urban areas, fixed route public transit is more accessible and offers greater flexibility. Transit in underserved areas, as in much of South King County, requires multiple transfers and, again, leads to a disproportionate amount of time invested in acquiring food.

Access to food is often not considered in changes to bus routes. The Hopelink site in Kirkland, WA—a center that in a 12-month period served 6,000 clients—faced this challenge. Due
to recent changes in bus routes—a nearby stop was removed—placing the closest bus stop nearly a half-mile from the center with limited pedestrian access. Even in the best weather circumstance, an able-bodied person would have difficulties transporting an adequate amount of food such a distance.

A large portion of clients also receive SNAP/WIC benefits; however, some groups report a lack of knowledge and awareness around food assistance programs available in the county. Lately there have been comments and concerns around the proposed changes to Public Charge and many food banks are seeing a decline in patrons with that issue being cited as the reason.

“There is a misconception that creating food banks creates food access, but it’s not truly accessible if it’s not on a bus line.”
Maggie Rickman, South King County Food Coalition