

FOOD IN OUR COMMUNITY:

AN EXPLORATION OF WESTERN WAYNE COUNTY

20

23

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BACKGROUND

In 2020, a group of organizations and community members who serve Western Wayne County, Michigan began gathering and formed the Western Wayne Food Policy Council (WWFPC). A food policy council is an organization that brings people from different parts of the food sector to influence food systems and food policy.

MISSION AND VISION

The Western Wayne County Food Policy Council (WWFPC) collaboratively shapes the local food system and works to ensure that nutritious food is accessible for all.

Our vision is that Western Wayne County is thoroughly nourished with a diverse, empowering and nutritious food system.

To learn more about the lived experiences and food needs of the community, the WWFPC conducted focus groups and utilized Photovoice (a research method that gathers participant-taken photographs and narratives to translate experience into actionable knowledge) in the cities of Dearborn, Inkster, Redford, Romulus, and Westland during the summer of 2023. These cities were selected after an analysis of data demonstrated their residents faced the most significant challenges affording basic needs out of the 17 total communities in the region. Additionally, members of the WWFPC had connections in these cities either through their programming or personal residences.

We highlighted feedback that was unique to each city and placed the comments into context through demographic data. We also summarized the information collected into three themes across the five cities: access, connectedness, and cost and quality. Feedback that is universal along with information that is specific to each community can help develop targeted interventions.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

CITY	# FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS	# PHOTOVOICE SUBMISSIONS
Dearborn	10	13 + 29 walk audit
Inkster	12	8
Redford	8	5
Romulus	4	22
Westland	20	30



Western Wayne Food Policy Council

	DEARBORN	INKSTER	REDFORD	ROMULUS	WESTLAND
Population	109,976	26,088	49,504	25,178	85,420
% White	86.4%*	18%	43.7%	42.1%	64.8%
% Black	4%	73.3%	47.2%	46.8%	21.8%
Employment Rate	57.1%	52.3%	60.5%	59%	59.5%
Median Household Income	\$58,467	\$34,122	\$61,340	\$64,712	\$56,630
% Living in Poverty	25.4%	37.8%	11.5%	12.7%	16.3%
% Living ▼ ALICE Threshold	43%	62%	39%	39%	45%

*Middle Eastern and North African was not a separate racial category

Sources: 2020 Census, 2022 American Community Survey, and United for ALICE

CITIES OF FOCUS

01 — Dearborn

Dearborn is home to a diverse population where 52.4% of residents speak a language other than English at home and 30.9% of the population is foreign born. Additionally, Dearborn is a young city, where 32.2% of the population is under 18 years old, which is significantly higher than the proportion of children in the state (21%).

02 — Inkster

Many residents in Inkster have financial struggles. Only 41.6% of households own their home, and 9.9% of residents do not have healthcare coverage. Furthermore, 17.9% of households lack a vehicle. Inkster has many young residents, as 30.8% of the population is 18 years old or younger. Additionally, 18.8% of residents of all ages live with a disability.

03 — Redford

Redford has the highest homeownership rate (75%) and the highest median household income of the five cities in this project. However, 7.5% of residents lack healthcare coverage. Racially, Redford is almost evenly split between White and Black residents (43.7% to 47.2% respectively).

04 — Romulus

Romulus has the lowest median gross rent (\$944) of the five cities in this project. However, one focus group participant noted how rent is high and is causing people to have trouble affording food. Like Redford, the proportion of the two largest racial groups are somewhat closely split (42.1% White, 46.8% Black).

05 — Westland

Of the five cities in this project, Westland's residents skew older, with a larger percentage of residents age 65 and older (15.8%) and lower percentage of residents age 18 and under (18.6%) than the other cities. Additionally, many of Westland's residents (20.8%) live with a disability.

DEARBORN

There were two focus groups: one at Leaders Advancing & Helping Communities (LAHC) in east Dearborn and one at Salina Intermediate School in southeast Dearborn.

Participants were recruited from LAHC programs. For Photovoice, photos were gathered from the public and Henry Ford Generation with Promise conducted a walking audit and guided Photovoice tour at an independent grocery store. Comments unique to Dearborn are listed below.

FOOD GROUP AND PHOTOVOICE FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY

Papaya and Greenland tend to have produce at lower prices than other stores, like Kroger, but it might not last as long.

Expired food can be found at grocery stores in the south end and grocers are not concerned about removing it from their shelves.

Students get a lot of their food from school. When school is out, it is challenging for families to afford food. School meals could also be healthier.

Construction and potholes impede access to grocery stores.

Diverse restaurant offerings and restaurants that offer healthy options are a point of pride and enjoyment for residents.

Some grocery stores make efforts to provide culturally appropriate food.

Dearborn



Quote

"Trying out grass-fed beef and chicken for dinner today in Dearborn."

-Dearborn Photovoice Participant

INKSTER

The focus group was held after an Enhance Fitness class at Dozier Recreation Center. All the participants were women and most were seniors. Photos were gathered from the general public. Comments unique to Inkster are listed below.

FOOD GROUP AND PHOTOVOICE FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY

The lack of a school system discourages new residents, especially families, and businesses from coming in and investing in the city. Schools are also an important outlet for feeding children.

Home and community gardens are a point of pride and an important source of food. Many people share food knowledge across generations through family gardens.

Families gather to dine at restaurants.

Many walk to get food and are thus limited to the places within walking distance, which oftentimes are convenience stores and gas stations.

The Dollar Store, where some people get their food, is also in a convenient location for walking. Some parents give their children their credit cards to walk to these stores to purchase food on their own.

Residents need a car or bike to get to food, like grocery stores or restaurants with healthy options located outside of the city. This increases financial and transportation barriers.

Inkster



Quote

"These are collard greens from my garden and tomatoes and zucchini. I grow cabbage also."

-Inkster Photovoice Participant

REDFORD

There was one focus group held at Redford Interfaith Relief, a food pantry. Participants utilized Redford Interfaith Relief to support their households. Photos were gathered from the general public. Comments unique to Redford are listed below.

FOOD GROUP AND PHOTOVOICE FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY

Residents utilize resources at the community center and are looking forward to a new community center. Claude Allison Park is another community asset.

Eagles Helping Hands and Redford Interfaith Relief are valued organizations that help fill the gaps in accessing and affording food.

Residents view areas of Redford as food deserts, with no fresh produce. There are a lot of dollar stores and liquor stores with little healthy food options. Some residents travel to Livonia, Dearborn, or Westland to obtain fresh produce.

The Farmers Market has a lot of craft vendors and limited hours, and the market manager is working to get farmers to accept Double Up Food Bucks, WIC, and Senior Project Fresh.

There is a geographic divide between north and south Redford and resources are not located in both regions. For example, there is a community garden only in the south as the north end garden closed. When the north end garden was open, there were issues in Redford with people harvesting from reserved beds and not communal beds.

Participants expressed that SNAP benefits are not enough, and that there could be more information shared (such as Double Up Food Bucks) so that people can maximize their benefits.

Redford



Quote

"This photo represents what food is readily available for our community adults, kids, seniors and infants. It's not the healthiest."

-Redford Photovoice Participant

ROMULUS

Romulus's focus group was held at the Romulus Library. Photovoice was solicited from the general community as well as at the Creekside neighborhood. Comments unique to Romulus are listed below.

FOOD GROUP AND PHOTOVOICE FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY

Block's and Kurtzhal's are important food hubs. Block's is a community gem for its great local food and good prices. It also has educational classes like produce canning. Some have challenges getting to it and parking because it is so busy. Kurtzhal's also sells a variety of unique, Michigan grown produce.

There are no grocery stores in Romulus and residents have to travel to neighboring cities for groceries or get food from corner stores.

Participants were interested in having a soup kitchen, community garden, and/or food delivery system, like Uber, in Romulus to increase access to food.

Transportation ideas included a "pay what you can afford" mobile food truck, subsidized bus pass, or free transportation to get food.

Food pantries in Romulus offer decent food, but don't have items for certain health conditions.

There are grandparents raising grandchildren, which stretches the overall household food budget.

Romulus



Quote

"Block's Farm Stand is amazing and full of fresh produce in Romulus. It's hard to get any other food because there's no grocery stores. We have to go to other cities."

-Romulus Photovoice Participant

WESTLAND

Two focus groups were held at senior living centers in Westland: Village of Our Savior's Manor in southeast Westland and Thomas Taylor Towers in central Westland. Photovoice was solicited at these sites in addition to the general community. Unique feedback from Westland is listed below.

FOOD GROUP AND PHOTOVOICE FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY

Café Marquette was a program that made lunches and residents from Thomas Taylor Towers would participate. It was run by the culinary students at the William D. Ford Career Tech Center. Due to a change in program leadership, these lunches are not offered anymore. The seniors miss this program.

Thomas Taylor Towers used to have a mobile grocery store on-site that had good variety, was reasonably priced, and took SNAP.

The power goes out a lot in the area, which causes food to go bad. It is costly to throw out food.

It would be helpful for senior living centers to have a chef to help prepare meals, especially for those who have difficulty cooking due to health challenges.

Diverse restaurant offerings and restaurants that offer healthy options are a point of pride and enjoyment for residents.

Focus: Hope provides commodity foods for seniors, which is beneficial. However, not all residents know how to use all the ingredients provided, like canned meats.

Westland



Quote

“Volunteering with AmeriCorps and observing the appreciation seniors have with being able to shop for produce on site!”

-Westland Photovoice Participant-

PRIORITY AREAS

Across all five cities, three main themes emerged from the feedback. These are described in more detail below.



01 — Access

Transportation networks impact the ability to access food. Most people access food at grocery stores. Food pantries, restaurants, schools, dollar stores, convenience stores, and gas stations are other local outlets. Farm stands, gardens, and farmers markets provide additional fresh fruits, vegetables, and other locally produced foods.



02 — Connectedness

Food is an important aspect of cultural and spiritual connection. Growing, preparing, and eating food can be a communal act, especially among families.



03 — Cost & Quality

Many people struggle to afford the foods they desire among the other expenses in their household budget. Rent is high and causes people to have trouble affording food.

The quality of food available in some communities leads to food safety concerns and does not meet the nutrition standards to live a healthy life.

ACCESS

Transportation and Infrastructure

- Seniors have challenges getting to grocery stores and existing bus programs are inadequate (i.e., a waitlist in Redford, Thomas Taylor Towers' bus in Westland doesn't support multiple users with mobility scooters, Nankin Transit limited in geography and hours, costs of public transportation can be prohibitive).
- Many people lack cars and are limited to the stores around them, which do not offer fruit and vegetables.
- Infrastructure around stores is not conducive to pedestrians or people who use public transportation, especially for those with disabilities.
- Construction impedes walkers.
- A subsidized bus pass or free transportation to get food can help residents fulfill this essential need. Fixed route bus lines don't go to where people need to travel, are not clean, and have safety issues.

Dearborn Photovoice Participant

"This construction is on Michigan Ave. It has been there for months. I walk to Kroger grocery store and have to cross Michigan Avenue to get to it. They don't have a crosswalk to make it easy to cross to there. The light where I cross from is blocked by construction. The traffic there is a mess. The safest way I can get there is to wait for my son to take me in his car. He is a doctor and doesn't have much time to take me. I walk more than one mile to get to the next nearest grocery store because I need to get food somewhere. And that store is more expensive than Kroger but what else can I do."



ACCESS

Access to Groceries

- Residents in Romulus, Inkster, and Redford in particular drive to stores in neighboring communities for groceries, spending lots of time and gas money. Many would like to see a big chain grocery store in their community. These are viewed to have fresher food, more choices, lower prices, and better quality.
- Food shopping also happens at liquor stores and gas stations, with limited options for healthy foods.
- Produce markets and butcher shops can help fill the gaps in providing fresh food.
- Online ordering can help people with transportation issues, but some seniors don't know how to use the system.
- Specialty foods like Kosher, vegan options, and gluten free items can be hard to find.
- Some food pantry policies are prohibitive to participation, like requiring clients to share their social security number.
- Participants desire a mobile food truck with discounted fresh foods where you pay what you can afford.

Romulus Photovoice Participant

""Dear Walmart, we need a local store here." The problem is we have no grocery store in Romulus, two non-chain stores in Wayne. I go to the Kroger near here, but I think it is Inkster. I go all the way to Belleville where this is a Walmart, Meijer, Aldi...or Canton for the same stores. If I had the time, I would make a display of sand and show empty product containers with receipts from all the other cities I shop and a skeleton hand, take a picture and label it "food desert"."



ACCESS

Fresh, Locally Grown Food

- Community gardens are valued assets and there is a desire for more neighborhood gardens to provide fresh produce for the community. However, some community gardens have closed in recent years (Inkster, North Redford).
- Individual home stands with fruits and veggies have disappeared as inflation increased.
- Farmers market hours are limited.
- Some residents are unaware of local farm stands and farmers markets, when they operate, and what benefit programs they accept. Residents look to Eastern Market or Ann Arbor as the only places that have these assets.
- Farms and agribusiness are points of pride in more rural parts of Western Wayne County; however, some farmland is being sold.
- There is an interest in eating locally grown food and supporting local farmers, if it is easily known, accessible, and affordable.

Redford Photovoice Participant

"This photo was taken at the Eastern Market in Detroit however the cucumbers and tomatoes were grown by my neighbor who lives across the street in Redford. What we consume is extremely important for our overall health. Starting healthy habits young is key."



ACCESS TO FRESH, LOCALLY GROWN FOOD



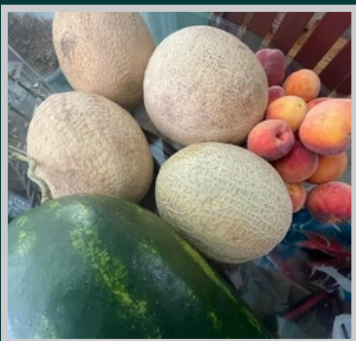
ROMULUS PHOTOVOICE

"These are purple peppers. I like to add them to spinach or kale salads! Gardening is not just a hobby; it's a lifestyle."



ROMULUS PHOTOVOICE

"It's sad to see a few signs like this in Romulus. We are losing several farms."



INKSTER PHOTOVOICE

"I am proud that people within the community are able to grow fresh produce for themselves and others to enjoy. Inflation makes it challenging to get the food I want, gas prices are near \$4/gallon. It's not always easy to get top tier items because of the cost of living. After working and dealing with construction I don't always have the energy to go to the store or prepare a home cooked meal. Attached is the photo of fresh food I purchased from Blocks in Romulus. My heart led me to the farmers market."

CONNECTEDNESS

Social Interaction

- Home gardens are an important source of fresh fruits and vegetables for many people and help lower food costs. They also expose multiple generations to food and food knowledge.
- Gathering around food brings people together to share love.
- Many young adults don't know how to cook so they go to restaurants, fast food restaurants, and order prepared food at corner stores to feed themselves and their families. One participant shared that her neighbor's trash bin is always overflowing with carryout containers, while her trash for the week is small because she knows how to cook her own food.
- Anxiety among large crowds in spreading illness causes some seniors to avoid congregate meal settings and shopping in stores.
- Some people know of others that use Meals on Wheels, which provides a daily check-in along with a meal, but they have no personal experience.

Westland Photovoice Participant

"Some of the goodies (fresh produce) received from my grandmother's garden in Westland."



CONNECTEDNESS PHOTOS

Several Photovoice participants submitted photos eating at local restaurants with friends and family members. Others shared photos of food at celebrations and get togethers. Below are a few photos that highlight the role that food has in culture, community building, and the economy.



WESTLAND PHOTOVOICE

"Creating this entree from ingredients from the local dollar store to share with family in the park. ."



DEARBORN PHOTOVOICE

"I'm proud of the food in my city."



INKSTER PHOTOVOICE

"Having fun with my family."

CONNECTEDNESS

Communication and Awareness

- There is a lack of communication in the community about available programs and a lack of coordination among agencies.
- To utilize Eagles Helping Hands in Redford, one needs a cart and to follow them on social media to know when they are open and what foods will be available.
- Food provided at pantries and through commodity foods are helpful if you know what to do with them. More education, recipes, and tastings are needed to know how to use certain items, like canned meats.
- More community outreach and information sharing needs to be done in print for those who don't have access to technology. Schools could be an information hub.

Redford Photovoice Participant

"This is from Redford EHH. This organization has a team of volunteers that not only assist Redford residence but others in the community. They have helped me with food many times as well as when my mothers house burned down. I would not be able to survive without them."



Romulus Photovoice Participant

"The senior center in Romulus hands out free fresh produce when they receive it from Forgotten Harvest. We seniors appreciate it."



COST AND QUALITY

Healthfulness

- Food trucks are increasing in number near corner stores and gas stations; however, they are expensive and use a lot of salt and seasoning. They don't have a lot of healthy options.
- Local smaller grocery stores like Value Center, Food Max, and Sun Valley have higher prices, challenges with safety, and expired foods.
- Many people shop at dollar stores. They are in good locations that are easy to get to and have brands, cheaper prices, a large variety, and accept EBT.
- Food shopping also happens at liquor stores and gas stations, with limited options for healthy foods.
- How grocery stores display their food impacts what people buy and their impression of the store. Grocery stores should stock healthier foods at kids' eye levels.
- Gardens help keep food costs low.

Dearborn Photovoice Participant

"My kids love honey crisp apples. They get it from school for snack and during the summer they ask me to buy it. I feel bad to say no because they are so expensive but this is the only kind of apple they will eat. I sometimes give up buying some stuff to have enough money to buy them honeycrisp."



COST AND QUALITY PHOTOS

Most people want to eat fruits and vegetables but they can be costly or not fresh at neighborhood locations. Home and community gardens help to meet this need.



DEARBORN PHOTOVOICE

"I am able to pick fresh vegetables from my garden in my yard. With prices rising, this helps me save money and have fresh food for my family and I."



DEARBORN PHOTOVOICE

"I love cantaloupe and have been having a hard time finding fresh ones. This picture is from my latest Target shopping trip. All the cantaloupe they had were going bad, all soft to the touch."



DEARBORN PHOTOVOICE

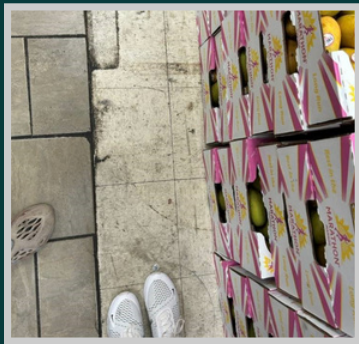
"This is an amazing garden that was made by LAHC. I can pick free herbs and vegetables this summer thanks to them."



DEARBORN PHOTOVOICE

"I'm a single mother [...] I want to show you the price for the salmon how expensive and really I can't afford it. My 10 year old son loves salmon but too bad I can't spend the money on it so I bought instead different kinds of food for the price of the salmon."

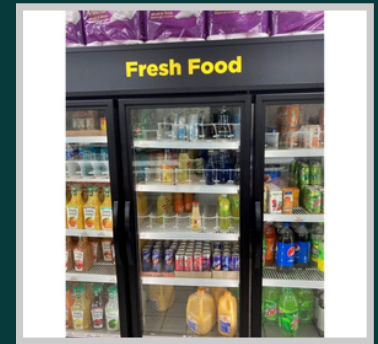
YOUTH WELLNESS AMBASSADORS TOOK PHOTOS AT A DEARBORN GROCERY STORE. THE PHOTOS BELOW REPRESENT SOME OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS RELATED TO COST AND QUALITY THAT YOUTH ARE OBSERVING WHEN SHOPPING AT GROCERY STORES.



"Unclean and uneven floors could be a tripping hazard to some shoppers and may suggest the store is not clean. If they don't clean the floors, how are they treating the food we are consuming?"



"In this grocery store, although it is rich in the traditional Arabian food, they also have varieties of food which is ideal for everyone as a whole, for example--rich in dairy products."



"This picture does show a variety of beverages; however, none of these look like 'fresh' options as the sign states."



"Culturally diverse vegetables are sold at the [...] grocery market. The price is high, yet the quality looks great. The peppers are red, vibrant and look fresh."



"A variety of fruits are displayed in the front of the store. This shows that they are advertising the healthier section like fruits and vegetables."



"Open food may be unsanitary, not trustworthy to eat even though it's accessible and may be quick to it. Maybe add plastic guards."

COST AND QUALITY

Food Pantries and Emergency Food

- Redford Interfaith Relief, a client choice food pantry, fills in the gaps and is a supplement to other shopping. It needs more storage space or a warehouse.
- Food pantries could give out a month's worth of food at once.
- Food pantries should stock more fresh produce and less pork. Produce can be rotten or not as fresh.
- Commodity foods from Focus Hope are available at senior centers monthly and are appreciated.
- Food pantries in Romulus offer decent food but do not have items for certain needs like COPD and diabetes. Some government programs offer options for low sodium or low sugar.
- Many churches operate food pantries.

Westland Photovoice Participant

"This food bank in Westland that gives out boxes of food every Thursday of the month. This helps out my family & I tremendously. Food prices are so high & we run out of food during the month. I can go here & get fresh fruit, vegetables, & meats. The people that volunteer hear are so kind & makes everyone, including me feel welcome. Going to places like this in my community reassure me that I have a back up in place to get the food I need to sustain my family during the months. This is a drive up in your car service & they load up your back seat or trunk with food."



COST AND QUALITY

Food Benefit Programs

- Participants shared struggles with SNAP. SNAP benefits are insufficient to cover rising food costs. One person remarked that “Those who are in government should live at least for a year on typical SNAP benefits to see how hard it is for those who receive SNAP benefits.” Some desire to have additional benefits if you purchase healthy options.
- Many people are unaware of additional benefits associated with SNAP enrollment, like Double Up Food Bucks, and classes could be offered to get the most out of SNAP benefits.
- Frequent power outages cause food insecurity, particularly in homes and complexes without a generator. It is costly to have to throw out food and SNAP benefits don’t increase to restock fridges.
- Participants shared that pandemic EBT benefits should be available to all families, not just low-income families, especially during the summer when kids are out of school. Many students rely on school meals and when school is on break, it is more difficult to eat nutritious meals.
- DUFEB, WIC, Senior Project Fresh are not available at all farmers markets. If they are available, residents are unfamiliar if they are accepted at their local market or how they work.
- Some people have challenges using Senior Project Fresh Coupons because the food must be grown locally and it’s not always clear where you can use it.

Westland Photovoice Participant

“My Freezer. Because of power outages and this building not having a generator, we are hesitant to buy food that will go to waste, after the next time lights go out. \$50 worth of food stamps don't go far these days.”



NEXT STEPS

The Western Wayne County Food Policy Council would like to thank all the community members who participated in the focus groups and submitted pictures and captions. We could not include all the great pictures in this report.

This project was funded through a grant from the Michigan Local Food Policy Council. Additional support was provided in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's REACH project and the Michigan Fitness Foundation.

We would also like to thank all the members of the WWFPC for their help implementing this project, reviewing and summarizing the findings, and drafting this report.

Going Forward

These findings are just the beginning of our efforts to shape the food system in Western Wayne County. We welcome continued feedback because working together, we have the power, expertise, and passion to advocate for equity in the food system.

We invite the community to participate in developing strategies based on the findings in this report and will be planning a summit in 2024.

To stay updated on the summit or to participate in monthly meetings of the WWFPC, email wwcfpc@gmail.com.

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