



The Value of a Meal

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Executive Summary

Food insecurity remains a pressing issue broadly across the country and in New Jersey specifically. While it is difficult to quantify the exact costs that hunger imposes on those experiencing it, it is well documented that food insecurity leads to increases in stress, negative health outcomes, and healthcare costs. At the same time, cafeterias from organizations such as universities, hospitals, and corporate campuses throw out huge amounts of prepared food every day simply because they are not purchased by their customers. Disposing of this food comes with a cost – financially as well as environmentally. Wasted food accounts for an estimated 22% of all landfill contents in New Jersey¹, where it breaks down and releases the potent greenhouse gas emission methane.

As a method of food redistribution, meal recovery provides an avenue by which prepared meals from large kitchens may be diverted from becoming food waste and can alleviate hunger for families fighting food insecurity. Investment in meal recovery provides a unique opportunity to alleviate the impacts of food insecurity in New Jersey while also strengthening existing infrastructure, supporting community bonds, and reducing waste.

The Cost of Food Insecurity

In the last year, 48 million people across the United States, including one in five children, experienced food insecurity, or the lack of consistent access to adequate food for an active, healthy life². Food insecurity occurred in every single county across the country and impacted 13% of New Jerseyans in 2024³, a percentage which has risen consistently over the last few years. The counties in the state which have the most limited access to healthy foods often also have the highest levels of food insecurity and the highest percentages of their populations living below the poverty level – a link which is far from coincidental⁴. As the rate of inflation rises, food

prices rise accordingly, and so does the prevalence of food insecurity. From 2019 to 2023, food prices rose 23%, a trend which is expected to continue in the next few years.

Food insecurity has been found to increase the risk of stress, anxiety, and depression in adults and can lead to poor behavioral, intellectual, and psycho-emotional development in children, leading to higher rates of behavioral problems and mental illness^{5,6}. In addition, young children living in food-insecure households are more likely to be hospitalized and have poorer overall health than children in food-secure homes. Lack of consistent access to fresh, healthy food has also been shown to increase the risk of many negative health outcomes, including diabetes, cardiovascular illnesses, and certain cancers⁵. This increased burden on individuals' health and mental wellbeing translates to increased spending on healthcare, which for New Jersey alone totaled over 1.3 billion dollars in 2016⁴. When distributed among the individuals experiencing food insecurity in the state, that translates to just over \$1,000 in additional healthcare costs per person linked to food insecurity. While it should be acknowledged that these costs are not distributed evenly across all of those experiencing food insecurity, and a part of those costs are likely covered by programs such as Medicaid and Medicare, it remains that at a per-person level, this is a sizeable and preventable expenditure that, if avoided, would likely be diverted back into the local economy to pay for other necessities.

The average cost of a meal in New Jersey in 2022 was \$4.19, and with the rates of inflation rising in the last four years, this number has only increased⁴. For many households experiencing food insecurity, even a supplement of two meals a week per person would alleviate much of the strain of lacking adequate food. The economic relief provided by mitigating the impact of food insecurity is not well studied, but based on current costs, it's estimated that providing even two meals a week per person would save a family of four over \$100 in meal costs per month.

Meanwhile, wasted food leads to 16% of all landfill emissions in the United States, making it the third largest source of methane emissions in the country⁷. When an untouched prepared meal is

disposed of, not only does improper disposal contribute to climate change, but the resources that went into it – from land and water to grow crops, to energy for transportation and storage – are squandered. A quarter of all surplus food produced in New Jersey in 2024 was already prepared⁸.

Food insecurity is an issue which affects millions of people across New Jersey and even more across the country, and yet the cost of food insecurity, in terms of healthcare, social, environmental, and economic costs, is not well understood. While the systemic issues and complex factors that cause food insecurity are difficult to uproot, there are efforts being made to mitigate the impact and provide relief to families who are impacted by this problem.

Meal Recovery as a Solution

Many organizations are currently working to combat food insecurity from different angles, ranging from groups working to protect federally funded benefit programs such as Women, Infants, & Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to organizations providing food to their community through soup kitchens or food pantries.

One approach that has not been widely implemented is meal recovery, in which prepared foods from commercial kitchens that have not been consumed by the end of the day, are packaged and distributed to individuals in need. These meals, prepared to feed workers, students, patients and loved ones, would normally contribute to the almost 78,000 tons of food wasted each year from overproduction from food service providers, caterers and retailers⁸. This perfectly good food has already been paid for and prepared, but without the intervention of meal recovery services, would normally be going to a landfill or, at best, a composting center. Transporting this food to either center for disposal is also costly and contributes to the more than three hundred thousand tons of prepared food that goes to waste each year⁸. This food is nutritious and fresh, and donating it to meal recovery organizations is a cost-efficient approach for handling

resources that have already been purchased and cooked and have not been sold; depending on the cost of waste management, a kitchen may even save money when compared to disposal by landfill or composting. Prepared meals also play a unique role in addressing food insecurity. Unlike pantry staples, they do not require kitchen space, time, or cooking ability to be utilized – a critical difference for individuals or families living in transitional housing without access to kitchens or managing disability, chronic illness, or competing time demands of work and caregiving.

Meal recovery organizations use their existing infrastructure to package the food and distribute it to their recipient partners. The packaged meals may be delivered directly to families, or may stock community pantries, kitchens, and fridges which are known to be sites where hunger relief can be found. Supplying these organizations with an additional source of donated food also reduces the amount of labor and resources required to serve their communities, saving them time and money.

This solution is not simply theoretical. Organizations that work to support low-income and food insecure populations, such as the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK), Homefront, and the Princeton YWCA, already receive recovered meals to supplement their efforts and diversify their normal offerings. These nonprofits serve a purpose beyond delivering meals: they're a gathering place and an avenue for people to seek out support that goes beyond a meal. For example, when individuals show up to TASK for a meal, they enter a space where they can also find assistance applying for healthcare, searching for a job, accessing job training programs, or taking art classes. Supporting these local groups therefore also fosters connection to the community and to each other. It is estimated that across three meal recovery organizations in New Jersey – [Share My Meals](#), [Table to Table](#), and [Foodrecovery.org](#) – over a million meals were moved in 2025 from those with surplus to organizations serving the community in this manner. Together, these organizations aim to reduce food waste and alleviate food insecurity

by connecting people with meals already prepared for them and supporting local community groups while doing so.

Conclusion

Meal recovery prevents significant methane emissions and millions of dollars in food waste, while providing untold and incalculable relief from stress, anxiety, and worry. Meal recovery takes the over eight hundred thousand pounds of food that would have been wasted and uses it to support children who are better prepared to learn, to unburden families with one less thing to worry about, and to strengthen community ties.

Expanding meal recovery with community partners in new areas would invigorate the fight against food insecurity while reducing healthcare costs and preventing the waste of thousands of pounds of food annually. At the same time, providing organizations that serve their communities with vital resources for free compounds those benefits by allowing them to reallocate financial resources to expand or strengthen programs. The true impact of meal recovery organizations is difficult to quantify, but further research could illuminate both the costs incurred by food insecurity and the value of meals provided to those who need them. Investing in meal recovery infrastructure strengthens all stakeholders, from those who receive the meals to community partners and even policymakers witnessing the impact of such efforts. This newer strategy to combat hunger requires increased support so it can continue to grow and support our most vulnerable community members.

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