

TOMPKINS COUNTY AGRICULTURE AT-A-GLANCE

Farmers work in relationship with the land and environment to provide the foundation of food for our community.

523

FARMS IN TOMPKINS
COUNTY (DECLINING)

75%

SMALL FARMS
(<180 ACRES)

1/3

FARMLAND RENTED

8.6%

OF FARMS ARE
CERTIFIED ORGANIC

\$65M

MARKET VALUE OF
PRODUCTS SOLD

70%

SELL < \$40,000
ANNUALLY



The people who plant, grow, raise and harvest the food we eat are at the heart of our local food system.

94%

FARMLAND FOR
GROWING ANIMAL
FEED

55%

FARMS REPORTING
NET LOSSES

19%

FARMS SELLING
DIRECT-TO-CONSUMER



<0.9%

FARMS RUN BY FARMERS
OF COLOR

56.8

AVERAGE AGE OF
FARMERS

78%

LAND FARMED BY MEN

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Challenges Identified by Production Stakeholders and Community Members

Workforce: A shortage of interested, trained, local employees. Farm labor is the biggest annual expense for local farms and critical for their viability.

Transitions: Transitions occur when ownership or land tenure changes or when an owner/operator decides to change their enterprise to new crops, new technology, or between conventional and organic techniques. Barriers to transitioning farms include skill building requirements, financial risk, and a profitability lag. It can be difficult to find new farmers with the financial capacity and skills to take over mature farms ready for new ownership. Young and minority farmers face additional barriers to finding capital and supportive networks.

Profitability: Limited access to retailers, distributors, and processors (e.g., slaughterhouses, canners, frozen food markets), and high costs of production (e.g., land, labor, insurance, regulatory costs) make it difficult to run a profitable agricultural business. Supplemental, “off-farm,” income is needed for most farm families to survive, and without existing wealth new farmers struggle to get off the ground.

Scale and Markets: Marketing was the biggest challenge identified by small farmers, who described it as an uphill battle in need of constant attention. Many small farms in Tompkins County do not have the capacity to supply at the scale needed to join wholesale distribution chains, have difficulty finding retail operations that will buy directly from them, and are frustrated by the time and skills required to provide customer service for direct-to-consumer sales.

Regulatory Burden: Rules and regulations are one-size fits all and layered through multiple municipalities, impacting modes of production and product standards at the point of sale. This impedes value-added opportunities, innovation, and access to new and diverse markets.

Business Support: Access to accountants, lawyers, insurance, and business / marketing support is limited, inconsistent, unreliable, and an additional cost for farmers, who are expected to operate modern businesses and juggle many competing priorities.

Land access: Due to systemic racism, increasing land prices, and development pressures, inequities for new and prospective farmers are practically insurmountable, especially BIPOC individuals and those without existing wealth. A high percentage of new and beginning farmers rent land, making long-term investment difficult and limiting their choice of agricultural products to cultivate or raise. The early years are the hardest and while some loans are available, they do not cover the costs of production in Tompkins County.

Climate change: Increased drought, erratic rainfall, late and early frosts, and the emergence of new pests have substantially increased time and resources needed to mitigate and adapt to extreme weather conditions.

Market Disruption from COVID-19: In 2020, farms experienced declining sales to restaurants, retailers, and distributors, while CSA and direct-to-consumer sales surged and then waned in 2021.

Community gardening: Residential and community gardens increase access to fresh produce, exercise, nature, and other people, and so have many benefits. However, community gardens depend on volunteers, have limited funding, and see fluctuating levels of use. Opportunities are limited for those who rent, are low-income, or have limited time. Even large gardens do not produce the majority of calories consumed by a typical household.

Read the full Executive Summaries: www.tompkinsfoodfuture.org/food-system-plan

Contact: Katie Hallas, Community Food System Plan Coordinator: kh788@cornell.edu

TOMPKINS COUNTY INFRASTRUCTURE AT-A-GLANCE

The process of how our food gets to our plates is complex, obscure and poorly understood by food consumers. It requires transportation, cold storage facilities, computer systems that track orders and inventory, and relationships and shared expectations between farmers, value added producers, distributors, retailers, and end users.



HOW MANY FOOD
DOLLARS LEAVE
TOMPKINS



WHERE ARE LARGE
DISTRIBUTORS
SOURCING FROM



MONTHS OR YEARS FOR
AN APPOINTMENT TO
PROCESS LIVESTOCK

Large food businesses that operate in Tompkins will not share their data or provide transparency about their operations here.



LOCAL DISTRIBUTORS SPECIALIZE
IN BUYING FROM LOCAL FARMS
AND ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SMALL FARMS HAVE TROUBLE
FINDING PROCESSORS TO FREEZE,
CAN, OR FERMENT THEIR PRODUCE



ENTREPRENEURS NEED ACCESS TO
COMMERCIAL KITCHENS,
REFRIGERATED TRUCKS AND
OTHER EXPENSIVE CAPITAL
EQUIPMENT

THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS IN
TOMPKINS IS HIGH, MAKING LOCAL
FOOD PRODUCTS MORE EXPENSIVE
THAN COMPETITORS



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Challenges Identified by Infrastructure Stakeholders and Community Members

Supplying seasonal items from local farms at wholesale levels requires a great deal of flexibility based on local weather conditions and the variable quality of small batch items from multiple farms. This lessens their competitiveness with larger, diversified distributors.

Hiring enough workers is an ongoing challenge. There is currently a national shortage of drivers. Other packers and low-skilled workers are also hard to come by and the cost of that labor is higher here than in other states, making our products expensive to produce.

Scaling up operations at farms and value added processing requires access to capital, facilities, technical expertise, understanding the regulatory environment, sourcing supplies, and sufficient business support.

Access to USDA-approved slaughterhouses is limited due to regulatory requirements and a shortage of trained butchers, causing backlogs that can last multiple years. Farmers need to cull herds in the fall when livestock has finished the grazing season and the meat is the appropriate age and weight. However, they compete with area hunters for access to the small meat processing facilities and with large operations for appointments at USDA facilities.

The cost of doing business in New York is higher than in other states, making it difficult to compete on a local as well as regional scale.

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Challenges Identified by Food Environment Stakeholders and Community Members

Food service and retail workers (especially those in the night economy) report feeling undervalued and underrepresented. There is a lack of visibility and support for food system workers and businesses and the issues they face. Food system workers have been disproportionately impacted by Covid, food insecurity, mental health issues, and other on-the-job burdens in an already exploitative industry. Workers in the night economy finish work at 2am, hungry and with extremely limited options to meet that need.

Affordability and perception limit resident's usage of SNAP at farmer's markets and CSAs. Underutilization hurts producers and consumers.

Hiring and retention are significant challenges for local food retailers. A limited labor pool plus high turnover means positions are frequently unfilled. Most retailers do not pay a living wage, exacerbating turnover.

Corporate decision-making restricts local retailers' ability to buy local. Regulations, such as GAPS certification, create barriers for local producers who would benefit from accessing larger markets.

Institutional food service limitations make it hard to incorporate local, seasonal foods (e.g. tight budgets, inadequate facilities, few workers, regulations that prevent direct purchasing agreements, and more).

Local farmers lack incentives to sell to institutional buyers who require low prices relative to direct market sales (farmer's markets, CSAs).

Small retailers operate on thin margins in our limited local market. Forced to increase prices just to get by, they inadvertently restrict accessibility for potential customers.

Volume and consistency of local food supply are the most challenging variables for retailers and restaurants trying to source local products.

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TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD ENVIRONMENT AT-A-GLANCE

A mix of businesses and institutions create the "food environment" in any community. Grocery stores, supermarkets, convenience stores, specialty markets, institutional food service, farmers markets, restaurants, public schools, and emergency food services impact the lives of residents and the broader local economy.

113

FOOD RETAIL
OUTLETS

105

FULL SERVICE
RESTAURANTS

74

FAST FOOD
RESTAURANTS

3,279

WORKERS IN FOOD
RETAIL SECTOR

\$37K

AVERAGE ANNUAL
WAGE

5

RESTAURANTS
PROVIDING LIVING
WAGE



LOCAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE
PURCHASING POWER, MINIMAL
LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT

AT LEAST 17 FOOD PANTRIES
COUNTY-WIDE, PRESENT IN EVERY
MUNICIPALITY. 25 FOOD BANK OF
THE SOUTHERN TIER PARTNERS.



FARMERS MARKETS IN 6
COMMUNITIES, EVERY DAY OF
WEEK, 143 VENDORS. THIN
MARGINS FOR FARMERS, HIGH
COSTS FOR CONSUMERS.

FOOD SERVICE WORKERS FEEL
UNDervalUED,
UNDERREPRESENTED,
UNSUPPORTED



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TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD ACCESS AT-A-GLANCE

Food security means always having physical & economic access to sufficient, safe & nutritious food that meets their needs for an active and healthy life.

11.6%

OF RESIDENTS ARE
FOOD INSECURE

13.3%

OF CHILDREN ARE
FOOD INSECURE

\$7.4M

EXTRA NEEDED FOR
FOOD INSECURE
FAMILIES TO MEET
THEIR NEEDS

1/3

FOOD INSECURE
RESIDENTS NOT
ELIGIBLE FOR SNAP

62%

SNAP ELIGIBLE
RESIDENTS NOT
ENROLLED

17%

AN AVERAGE MEAL
IN TOMPKINS COSTS
ABOVE THE
NATIONAL AVE.



WIC

PARTICIPATION HAS
DECLINED SINCE 2011



**TRUMANSBURG
GROTON ENFIELD**

FOOD INSECURITY HOTSPOTS



Warming, extreme weather events, and coastal flooding will all reduce the production and distribution of food. These shifts will lead to price spikes, shortfalls and exacerbated inequalities.



52%

WHEAT LOSS BY END
OF THE CENTURY

75%

FOOD COMES FROM
JUST 12 PLANTS AND
5 ANIMALS

77%

WORLD'S
FARMLAND USED
FOR ANIMAL FEED
OR GRAZING

Challenges Identified by Food Access and Security Stakeholders and Community Members

Affordability: An average meal in Tompkins County is 17% more expensive than the national average. High-cost food places an additional burden on low-income residents already struggling to afford housing, childcare, transportation, and other necessities. Fully one-third of food insecure residents earn too much to qualify for public food assistance programs, yet struggle to stretch a limited food budget. Among those Tompkins residents who are eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps), only 30–40% are enrolled. Neither SNAP nor WIC (Women Infants and Children) cover all food costs and the enrollment process and eligibility are challenging to navigate.

Transportation: A spectrum of transportation-related issues disrupt food access and security, including not owning a vehicle (over 5,500 residents), lacking reliable access to a vehicle or ride, inaccessibility of bus routes and times, the hardship of transporting groceries on a bus, and limited food delivery.

Time: Food shopping and preparation is time consuming. SNAP and WIC provide groceries that include canned and frozen meals, but fresh prepared foods are not allowed. Without adequate space and equipment, cooking becomes even more time consuming and the nutritional balance of food consumed suffers.

Systemic Problems, Root Causes: Food insecurity is inherently tied to other structural factors: inadequate wages, intergenerational poverty, racism and classism, mental health and physical disabilities, and housing and transportation insecurity. Racial disparities in food assistance enrollment show higher levels of food insecurity among Black residents, which is layered on top of the lowest rates of income and highest rates of poverty in the county.

Awareness of Support Services: Private food assistance programs help residents access and afford food. The majority of services in Tompkins are concentrated in the City of Ithaca and residents find it challenging to keep track of what is available and when, who is eligible, and what to do to receive support. Families without transportation, people living in rural areas, people with disabilities, seniors, children (especially 0-4) and people of color are hardest to reach with existing services.

Limited Access to Nutritious, Fresh, Culturally Appropriate Foods: Produce is challenging to distribute and keep fresh, so small retailers and many pantries opt for shelf-stable food options. These convenience foods do not fill the nutritional, cultural, or preferential needs of county residents.

Evolving Emergency Feeding Programs: Food pantries and other safety net food programs provide crucial support to people in need of food. Unfortunately, stigma deters people from utilizing these services. Residents running pantries expressed their dissatisfaction with the emergency food distribution model and a desire to dramatically shift the service model toward “free groceries” or “food centers” and reduce the need for them altogether. They also expressed the need to train pantry volunteers in trauma-informed service and a desire to hire staff as rates of volunteerism decline. Without paid staff and consistent funding, pantries lack the resources to build capacity in many important areas, including grant-writing, data collection and tracking, delivery systems, sourcing and storing fresh and culturally appropriate foods, customer service skill development, and community outreach—all of which could help address unmet needs.

Climate-Induced Food Losses: Access to food in Tompkins County depends upon a vast global network of producers who use a wide array of means to safely transport perishable and staple items. Worldwide, these systems are under threat from shifting temperatures, extreme weather, and rising seas. The resulting shortfall in supplies, increased costs for cooling and transportation infrastructure, and more frequent spoilage of perishable items will likely reduce our ability to access preferred foods and increase our grocery bills.

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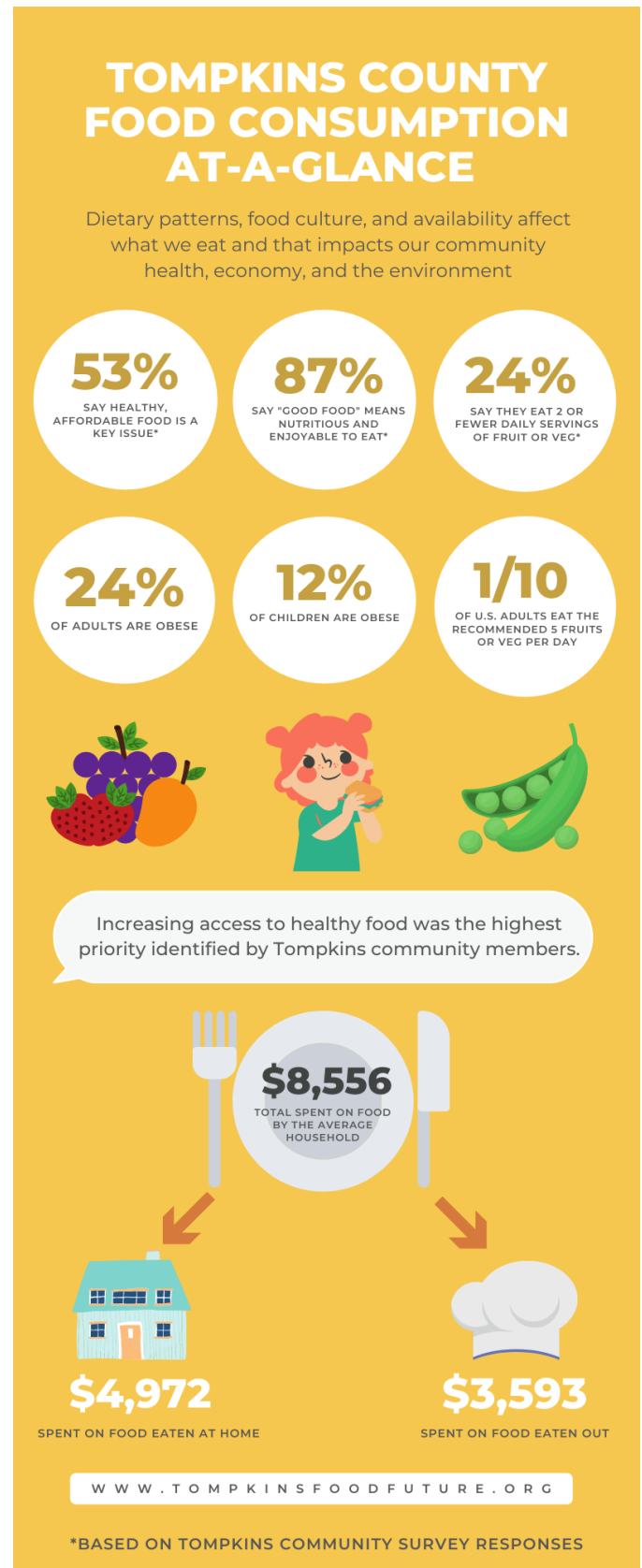
Challenges Identified by Stakeholders and Community Members

Fruits and Vegetables: Nine out of 10 Americans do not eat enough fruits and vegetables. Tompkins County residents are no exception, although we may be doing better than average. The USDA recommends five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Only 32% of our community survey respondents claimed to eat that many and 24% admitted to eating two or fewer servings per day. Tompkins has many of the indicators the CDC uses to measure availability of fruits and vegetables (farmer's markets, farm to school programs, salad bars in schools, and the existence of a Food Policy Council), but many of these resources are used by a small minority of consumers.

Limited Access to Nutritious, Fresh, Culturally Appropriate Foods: Produce is challenging to distribute and keep fresh, so small retailers and many pantries opt for shelf-stable food options. These convenience foods do not fill the nutritional, cultural, or preferential needs of county residents. The options throughout the food environment are similarly limited by infrastructure and business decisions. Ten percent% of survey respondents said that the food they wanted to eat was not available. When produce is available to consumers, many lack the familiarity, skills, time, or equipment needed to prepare, cook, and eat these foods.

Eating Out: Almost half of our meals are prepared by others. Added salt, sugar, and fat in restaurant and other prepared foods is difficult to identify and manage when ordering from a menu or picking up a quick meal. Even consumers who read labels to learn the nutritional content of prepared meals sometimes compromise in the moment to make quick choices from available options.

Chronic Illness: Across New York State, more than 10% of the population has been diagnosed with diabetes—double the rate just two decades ago—and another 4.5 million New Yorkers have prediabetes. Within the County, the rate of hospitalization for diabetes-related complications has doubled in the six years spanning 2008–14. Young people are also at increased risk. Heart disease, meanwhile, is now the second-highest cause of death in Tompkins County, with 138 deaths per 100,000. In its 2013–17 Community Health Assessment, the Tompkins County Health Department estimated that 55.1% of adults and 26.6% of school-age youths in the county were overweight or obese. These statistics suggest that more than half of adults and more than one-quarter of school-age youth in Tompkins County are at risk for progression to diabetes and/or cardiovascular disease.



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Challenges Identified by Food Waste and Recovery Stakeholders and Community Members

Access to food scrap drop spots can be difficult for people without bike or car transportation, especially those who live in low-income neighborhoods.

Lack of small- to medium-sized collectors and community composting sites limit composting options for residents and businesses.

Contamination, especially at events, public locations, and the front end of restaurants, is a challenge and requires education and facilitation to promote quality control.

Funding isn't sufficient to expand all aspects of food reduction and recovery, including wasted food prevention, small and moderate food scrap collectors, and processors.

Curbside food scrap collection is not currently available in any municipality, despite a successful, since-concluded pilot program in the City of Ithaca.

People hold misconceptions and need education and training related to composting. People often do not see the direct benefit, have had negative experiences due to incorrect practices, or simply do not know how to compost.

Having the space to compost outdoors is a challenge for many residents—particularly those who rent in the City of Ithaca (70% of the population).

Businesses are concerned about liability and food safety. Citing these fears, they refuse to donate all of the edible, yet unsalable food and instead opt for that food to be wasted, either ending up in the landfill, or in some cases composted.

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TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD WASTE & RECOVERY AT-A-GLANCE

Wasting food is a misuse of valuable resources. Food is the single largest component of solid waste in landfill and incinerators - and a major source of the greenhouse gas methane.

3,384,900

LBS OF FOOD WASTE
COMPOSTED BY
CAYUGA COMPOST

120,372

LBS OF RESIDENTIAL
FOOD SCRAPS
COLLECTED



**AN ESTIMATED 35% OF ALL FOOD
PRODUCED IS NEVER EATEN.**

1,400

LBS OF FOOD SAVED
PER DAY BY FDN

14

FOOD SCRAP DROP
SITES IN TOMPKINS

**UNEATEN FOOD IS
RESPONSIBLE FOR 4%
OF US GHG EMISSIONS**



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