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Beyond Books: How Public and Academic Libraries in the United States Fight Food Insecurity

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Abstract

Public and academic libraries in the United States (U.S.) are actively addressing food insecurity within their communities. Through a review of existing literature and original mixed-methods research involving 55 library professionals, this study identified a wide array of initiatives that include direct services like food pantries, summer meal programs, cooking classes, and after-school snacks, to indirect support services such as seed libraries, and resource navigation. The findings highlight that while these services provide vital community support, libraries face significant challenges in supporting them, particularly due to funding, staffing, and outreach. The article concludes by offering a framework of planning questions to help library teams in assessing community needs, developing sustainable partnerships, and aligning food security initiatives with their broader institutional missions.

Introduction

Libraries support lifelong learning and the wellbeing of their communities; therefore, addressing food insecurity aligns directly with the broader mission of libraries. They remove barriers by offering food aid and helping patrons fully take part in educational and enrichment activities (Bruce et al., 2017). The three most common ways public libraries supported food security were food distribution for youth (49%), seed libraries (36%), and food distribution for adults (30%) (Urban Libraries Council, 2023). The three biggest challenges libraries faced in providing these services in both rural and urban libraries were staffing, funding, and community awareness of the program (Urban Libraries Council, 2023). Academic libraries support student retention and independent learning; however, they are less likely to provide basic needs support, including programs to alleviate food insecurity, than public libraries (Lopez et al., 2024). For academic libraries, programs tended to highlight the collection or research services, while programming around life skills were the least common (Kelly, 2020).

The adage “we can do more with more” is clear from a recent paper that studied the services displayed on community college library websites versus accompanying public library websites (Lopez et al., 2024). When the budgets of community college libraries were compared, those who advertised services for basic needs had larger overall budgets than those who did not advertise these services. Likewise, when public libraries were compared, those who advertised basic-needs services had more full-time equivalent staff than those who did not advertise these services (Lopez et al., 2024).

Extending library services to include food assistance is a natural progression because, as food insecurity increases, especially among vulnerable populations, more options and solutions are needed, and as trusted entities, libraries can provide stigma-free places to receive assistance (Bruce et al., 2017). The following literature review examines how libraries have addressed funding challenges, expanded services, and used partnerships and staffing approaches to support these efforts.

Literature Review

Food insecurity affects people worldwide, including in the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service reports the percentages of U.S. households that are food secure and food insecure. In 2023, 86.5% of U.S. households were food secure, which was lower than in 2022 when 87.2% of households were food secure. In addition, 82.1% of households with children were food secure in 2023, leaving 17.9% of households with children who were food insecure. Children are protected from substantial reductions in food intake, and, therefore, in almost half or 9% of households with children, only adults were food insecure (USDA, 2025).

The percentage of food-insecure U.S. households with adults 65 and older in 2022 was 9.1% and 11.4% for seniors living alone (Reed-Jones, 2023). A Point-in-Time count by the Department of Housing and Urban Development during the last ten days of January 2024 found that 771,480 people were experiencing homelessness, which was an 18% increase from the prior year and the largest one-year increase on record (Torres, 2025). According to Feeding America’s (2025) Map the Meal Gap program, which provides county-level food insecurity and food cost estimates, every county across the nation experienced food insecurity, and this was notably experienced by residents of Southern states.

Food insecurity negatively affects physical health, academic performance, and engagement in educational opportunities. Food insecurity is a major public health issue nationwide, affecting almost 16 million families (Bruce et al., 2017). The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) helps children access healthy meals at no or reduced cost during the school year. However, when the school year ends, families report obstacles to accessing community meal programs, such as a lack of awareness, outdated information, transportation issues, ease of access to the location, the application process, and concerns related to immigration status (Bruce et al., 2017). Free or

reduced-cost meals were provided to 22.1 million children during the school year; during the summer, this number drops to 3.8 million (Barack, 2019).

Almost half of the 17,496 public libraries in the U.S. host programs that provide food to youth, and a third provide food to adults in need (Smith, 2023). More than 2,500 are in "food deserts," communities with few (or no) sources of affordable fresh food. Among libraries that took part in summer meal programs, they reported that it was the third most popular summer program offered at their library, with story time second and summer reading activities first (Barack, 2019).

Libraries provide a variety of programs that support food security. Activities that libraries host include food pantries, nutrition education programs, and meal distribution. These efforts directly meet the immediate needs of the community while reducing stigma by integrating food support into library services as an inclusive, non-judgmental part of library services (Santo et al., 2023; Bruce et al., 2017). Libraries can increase the impact of their food distribution programs and make them more sustainable by collaborating with local food banks and nonprofit organizations (Urban Libraries Council, 2024). Many libraries take part in programs that improve food security, such as gardening programs (Lenstra, 2020), summer meal programs (Ishizuka, 2014), and food pantries (Windsor, 2023; Moyer, 2024). In addition, libraries also promote food literacy and food aid resources (Ishizuka, 2014).

Food insecurity is also a growing problem for college students, and it changes their ability to finish their degrees, especially for those who are first-generation college students (Wolfson et al., 2022). Moreover, food insecurity is experienced at higher rates by students from traditionally underrepresented groups, such as students who are nonbinary and trans individuals, single parents, Indigenous, Black, former foster youth, people with disabilities, and those who are unhoused or at risk of losing housing. While food insecurity is experienced at most, if not all, colleges, and universities, it is more prevalent at public colleges and universities (Savoie-Roskos et al., 2022).

Due to the rising cost of attending college, more than 30% of college students faced food insecurity at some point during their education (U.S. Government Accountability Office [USGAO], 2018). Food insecurity among college students is consistently higher than in the general population, with an estimated 41% of students experiencing food insecurity (Nikolaus et al., 2020). Declines in public funding for higher education are linked to increased tuition and a growing number of students who were food insecure in college (Wood, 2020).

One source of financial support for qualifying students is the federal Pell Grants, which provides funds for education that do not need to be repaid. The program was launched in 1972 to help a growing number of students obtain undergraduate degrees (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). When the program was originally set up, it covered almost 50% of the costs associated with college, such as in-state tuition, fees, and room and board at two-year colleges and about 39% of these expenses at public four-year colleges (USGAO, 2018). In 2018, those percentages were reduced to 37% for two-year colleges

and 19% at public four-year colleges (USGAO, 2018). The largest award in 2025-2026 was $7,395 (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). For comparison, the poverty guideline for a single person for the forty-eight contiguous states and the District of Columbia was $15,650 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

While food insecurity among college students has grown, it has not been sufficiently studied, and no national estimate of the issue exists (USGAO, 2018). Having a low income was the most significant risk factor for being food insecure in college. While over 3.3 million students were potentially eligible for SNAP, over half, or 57% were not receiving benefits as of 2016 (USGAO, 2018, p.19). However, it should be noted that college students faced significant barriers to receiving federal food aid through SNAP. Legislation passed in 1980 exempted students enrolled at least half-time in college from receiving benefits with few exceptions (Dickinson, 2021). Without federal food aid for students, colleges have responded to the need by opening food pantries and educating students about the process of applying for SNAP benefits (USGAO, 2018). As of September 2018, there were 656 campus food pantries registered as members with the College and University Food Bank Alliance to supply free food to students in need. However, the actual number of campus food pantries is higher, as this figure does not include college food pantries that are not members (USGAO, 2018).

Library Initiatives to Foster Food Security

The examples presented below describe what a variety of libraries have done to support food security. When possible, the examples highlight how the library funded the initiative, with whom they collaborated to increase financial sustainability, who the program benefits, and any lessons learned in hosting the program. The authors aim to provide examples that libraries can emulate to begin their own program. Our goal is to show, when possible, how these efforts can be funded through community partnerships, foundations, government programs, and grants. To be sustainable, these programs need consistent and adequate support.

Public Libraries

Seed Libraries, Seed Swaps, Community Gardens, and Cooking Classes

The Pima County Public Library system in southern Arizona offers heirloom and open-pollinated seeds for free to library patrons through their seed library. The seeds are grown by community members and include desert-adapted seeds, which grow in harsh, dry climates. The seed library was launched by local partners including the Community Food Bank, the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, the Native Seeds/SEARCH, and the University of Arizona Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (Pima County Public Library, 2025). This program is designed to reinvigorate the joy of growing local food, developing a collection of desert-adapted seeds, and creating a community of sharing. There are brochures in English and Spanish, as well as a video on how to use the library.

In Michigan, the Lyon Township Public Library runs a seed library that includes free seeds, a demonstration garden, and gardening classes for interested community members (Conti, 2022). While sharing and saving seeds as a community are not new

practices, pairing these efforts with a public library increases awareness and access to these resources and deepens community bonds. The Lyon Township Public Library also tries to supply seeds from regions such as India that their clientele long for and will grow in the local climate (Conti, 2022). Use care when planning a seed library and avoid distributing invasive seeds and plants when building your library's seed collection.

There are community gardens at public libraries in North Carolina, and they create opportunities for food justice, food access, and food literacy (Lenstra, 2020). In Catawba County, the Newton Public Library has run a community garden since 2014 for educational programs and supplied vegetables to the local community food bank, The Corner Table Food Kitchen (Catawba County Government, 2022). At the St. Louis County Library System, a collaboration was set up with a local nonprofit, Gateway Greening, to create community gardens at public libraries. At several locations, lawns were transformed into garden space, and gardeners could apply for a space and pay a $25 annual fee (Seed St. Louis, n.d.).

Seed libraries support community resilience by preserving the genetic diversity stored in locally adapted seeds. While seed libraries have their limitations for easing food insecurity due to the space, time, and money required to establish and maintain a garden, they are essential resources for those looking to connect with the environment, protect traditional food sources from extinction, and have fresh, seasonal food (Conti, 2022).

Summer Meal Programs

Across the nation, 20% of children experience food insecurity with rural areas experiencing rates up to 50% (Feeding America, 2025). This situation becomes particularly worsened during the summer when school lunch programs are unavailable. Consequently, communities often use multiple programs to address the meal gap children experience during these times. To illustrate, the authors examine how two public library systems in California implemented their summer meal programs.

In 2015, the Santa Clara County Library District (SCCLD) utilized federal Summer Food Service Program funding for children's meals, supplemented by private funding for caretaker meals, to provide a library meal program for six to eight weeks across 10 communities experiencing low income (Bruce et al., 2017). More recently, in 2024, the SCCLD's Lunch at the Library program served over 3,000 meals through the support of the Silicon Valley YMCA and Second Harvest Food Bank (SCCLD, 2024; SCCLD Foundation, n.d.). Similarly in 2024, in a partnership between Feeding San Diego and the San Diego County Library, the library provided five days of weekly prepackaged meals for children, along with food safety training, reaching over 88,000 individuals across 14 locations, including rural areas, Native American reservations, and large migrant farmworker communities (Casares, 2024; Food Research & Action Center, n.d.).

As of 2017, using data provided by the USDA, over 3.6% of the 40,000 sites that provide free summer meals through the USDA program were libraries (Lenstra &

D'Arpa, 2019). However, it is important to note that there is unevenness in the distribution of these services. For example, two similarly populated areas, Georgia and North Carolina, had widely different participation with Georgia hosting 95 locations and North Carolina hosting 9 locations (Lenstra & D'Arpa, 2019). Summer is a time when public libraries increase their youth programming, and summer reading initiatives are particularly popular with youth (Barack, 2019). For school-aged children experiencing food insecurity, it can also be a time when they are not receiving NSLP benefits; therefore, summer meals at a library can be a significant help (De La Cruz et al., 2020).

As accessible community spaces, libraries can use existing programs, partnerships with local school systems, and resources to help address food insecurity. Additionally, libraries can name and collaborate with local partners or explore community grants to help support children and their families.

After-school Snacks

The Columbus Metropolitan Library partnered with the Children's Hunger Alliance to reduce food insecurity in Central Ohio by providing after-school snacks throughout the week and offering services on Saturdays. A typical snack included fruit, vegetables, protein, grains, and milk for children 1-18 years of age. The program was offered at 16 of the twenty-three branches in the Columbus Metropolitan Library system (Columbus Metropolitan Library, 2024). In South Carolina, the Charleston Public Library provides after-school snacks and meals through its Kids Café Program, a collaboration with the Lowcountry Food Bank. The food options were offered at nine branch locations, with an added branch offering after-school snacks through a partnership with the Charleston Friends of the Library (Charleston Public Library, n.d.).

Providing after-school snacks helps fill gaps that children experience at the end of the day. Collaborations are important to sustain efforts such as these.

Partnerships to Expand Food Access

The Central Arkansas Library System (CALS) in Little Rock, Arkansas, was looking for new ways to remove barriers for their community when they were contacted by city directors and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance to apply for a grant to address food insecurity for children. By collaborating, Nate Coulter, the Executive Director of CALS, had support in figuring out the complexities of the USDA reimbursement for meals program. With that in hand, he hired a full-time library employee to build out a program to set up more free meal locations through faith-based, local, and library locations. Another angle that CALS addressed was the inability to feed adults and caretakers who have gone with children to the meal locations since they are not eligible for the federal program. CALS raised money through donations to provide meals to caregivers (Windsor, 2023).

The Madison Public Library's partnership initiatives illustrate how libraries can effectively collaborate with community partners to expand access to local food programs. In Dane County, Wisconsin, where one in ten residents faced food insecurity in 2022, the library system partnered with the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and the

River Food Pantry to provide food (Second Harvest Food Bank & Public Health Madison & Dane County, 2025). In one program, volunteers at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church prepared daily lunches, allowing a single-branch library to feed 50-60 individuals weekly (Chiriboga-Pineda, n.d.). The River Food Pantry, which receives federal and local funding, restored one branch library's pantry and used two branch libraries as delivery locations for its mobile meal program (Chiriboga-Pineda, n.d.). The River Food Pantry's mobile lunch program primarily runs in communities with large youth populations that rely on school meal programs and therefore provides meals six days a week when school meal programs are closed (Madison Public Library, n.d.).

Through these partnerships, the River Food Pantry served over 2,500 people per week (Peters, 2024). The Madison Public Library effectively proves how libraries can play an important role within their community's food ecosystem, successfully bridging the gap between local food programs and patrons in need. Libraries can adopt an initiative-taking approach to address food insecurity by strategically engaging in conversations with local community partners. This allows them to use the unique assets of both groups, maximizing their collective community reach.

Friends of Libraries and Food Programs

Friends of the Library volunteers play a vital role in supporting their local public libraries through advocacy efforts, public awareness campaigns, book sales, event organization, and fundraising initiatives. This support can foster community partnerships and generate supplemental financial support for various library programs and services. For example, during the school year, the Charleston County Public Library hosts the Kids Café Program, an after-school meal program primarily funded through a partnership with the Lowcountry Food Bank, with additional support for one branch provided by the Charleston Friends of the Library (Burns, 2024).

The Charleston Friends of the Library has fostered partnerships with local donors for matched donations and businesses that distribute a part of their sales to support the program further. The Kids Café Program provided over 8,500 nutritious snacks and meals annually at select branches (Holy City Sinner, 2023).

Similarly, in Tallahassee, Florida, the Friends of the Library Leon County sponsored free food and Care Kits for residents, further proving the impact that Friends groups play in addressing community needs (Friends of the Library Leon County, n.d.). Friends of the Library groups can help libraries in addressing food insecurity through open discussions aimed at reviewing local needs, finding existing skills and relationships within the community, creating actionable plans, proving realistic fundraising goals, and enlisting volunteer support.

Pantry Donations

Beyond serving as a location where meals can be accessed, libraries can augment community food security efforts through the establishment of pantries or by serving as easily accessible donation locations for community partners. The authors will highlight how one New York and two Alabama libraries have actively engaged in and continue this work.

Each December, all fifty-four branches of the Queens Public Library system in New York host their annual canned food drive to support the food bank for New York City (Queens Public Library, n.d.). In response to local store closures in 2022, the Gardendale Public Library in Alabama started a pantry stocked with non-perishable food, relying on community donations. This pantry served between 50 and 75 people monthly, with visits typically serving as emergency supplies where families can pick up items up to twice a month due to limited supplies (Hanner, 2022). Following a similar model, in 2023, the Hoover Public Library in Alabama launched an indoor pantry and installed a little free pantry outside its library grounds. These initiatives began with first donations of non-perishable food and hygiene products from library staff and are sustained through ongoing community contributions (Robinson, 2023).

Both the Queens Public Library and Hoover Public Library encourage the utilization of kindness campaigns, held in December (National Giving Month) and February (National Random Acts of Kindness Month), to encourage local community members to donate non-perishable food and toiletry items throughout the month, emphasizing how collective efforts can positively support one another. Through these adaptable models, libraries can start small and expand to fit their community's needs by providing a list of needed donation items, selecting a donation period that aligns with the community's donation habits, and regularly sharing the impact of these efforts with members.

Library Fridges and Food Security

According to Bennett (2023), Feeding America's report showed that the pandemic led to an increase of three million individuals facing food insecurity. Recognizing these growing community needs, libraries nationwide adopted various strategies to provide relief, including expanding their dry food donation programs to include fresh produce and perishable staples.

Charleston County Public Library installed Free and Fresh Fridges in three of its eighteen branches (Bennett, 2023). Similarly, Des Moines Public Library used a $10,000 grant to install fridges in two branches in zip codes with the highest community food pantry usage. Further showing community-driven efforts, three local high school students in the Poughkeepsie Public Library District launched a GoFundMe campaign, successfully raising $2,000 for a community fridge in a branch where one in four community members experienced food insecurity (Bennett, 2023). The upkeep of these projects, including checking end dates and keeping cleanliness, is managed through volunteers or staff.

Vertical Gardening and Library Programming

Earlier, libraries that promote community food security through community gardens and seed lending were mentioned. Next the authors will share an indoor option that can be used year-round. To combat food insecurity challenges while improving access in the county, the Gwinnett County Public Library adopted an innovative approach to community gardening. Between 2017and 2021, the food insecurity rate in Gwinnett County was reported to be 7%, lower than the Georgia average, but the increasing number of children enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch programs (56% in 2022-2023) continued to signal a community need (Gwinnett County Health & Human Services, n.d.). In 2016, the 15-branch system received an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant to buy vertical aeroponic Tower Gardens® (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2018).

To combat food insecurity challenges while improving access in the county, the Gwinnett County Public Library adopted an innovative approach to community gardening. This initiative grew fresh produce and supported over 180 unique STEAM programs, encompassing English language food vocabulary, culinary literacy, teen chef competitions, photography lessons, and contributions to community meal programs (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2018). The multi-faceted approach the library system took in incorporating these vertical hydroponic gardens allowed them to serve multiple demographics using the library. Indoor vertical gardens offer a compact, year-round, reduced pest growing environment due to their soilless nature, which allows libraries to cultivate fast-growing, nutritious produce or edible native plants. To explore this, libraries should assess space needs, seek financial support or partnerships with community organizations serving vulnerable populations, and align these gardens with their existing or innovative programs.

Social Workers at the Library

Libraries are increasingly filling the gaps and adapting to meet the changing needs of their patrons (Wahler et al., 2020). The City and County of San Francisco created the first position for a full-time social worker on staff at the San Francisco Public Library in 2009. The individual was hired to help patrons experiencing homelessness (Provence, 2018; Dankowski, 2018).

Libraries are increasingly collaborating with local governments to host social workers in the public library system. In Volusia County, Florida, social workers were hired to help the public navigate a variety of needs including food security. Residents are given information and referrals on a wide variety of topics, including SNAP benefits. Residents can schedule appointments online or meet with a social worker during their drop-in hours (Volusia County, Florida, n.d.).

Academic Libraries

Food Pantry Support

Academic libraries can also support food security efforts indirectly and directly through educational opportunities. One academic institution, Valencia College (VC), in Florida, recognized that student holistic support includes addressing food insecurity. In 2020, almost 34% of VC's, 66,000 students, were Pell Grant recipients (VC, 2020). Federal financial need guidelines for Pell Grants underrepresented VC students' needs because those grants do not provide financial help to non-degree-seeking students, who include 26% of the VC student population (VC, 2020). Not surprisingly, in a 2021 VC survey, almost 40% of VC students reported they could not buy enough food supplies (Martinez, 2023).

In 2023, the College received a four-year grant donation of nearly $400,000 from the Florida Blue Foundation to invest in a new pantry system that is coupled with food donations from Second Harvest Food Bank to address this non-academic barrier to student learning and graduation success (Martinez, 2023). To support these institutional efforts, VC campus libraries run food, sock, and period product donation drives, permanently house donation bins, provide emergency menstrual supplies, and host workshops on buying eco-friendly menstrual products and budget-friendly healthy food options. The latter, and its research guide, provide students with information and tips about reading food labels, finding unit prices, bulk buying, prioritizing lower-cost in-season foods, and more.

Other academic institutions have also integrated libraries into their student intervention initiatives. The Pioneers for H.O.P.E. (Helping Our Pioneers Excel) program at California State University at East Bay (CSUEB), is a student intervention program that tackles housing insecurity, food insecurity, and students in crisis. Through a partnership with the Alameda County Food Bank, CSUEB provides students with access to fresh foods and pantry staples (CSUEB, n.d.). Taking advantage of the library's extended hours, CSUEB students can access healthy snacks and beverages at the library's after-hours kiosk when the primary campus pantry is closed (Wood, 2020). Additionally, the library provided prepackaged food bags at its circulation desk, offered SNAP application help, and used a campus-based text messaging alert system to inform students about where food from leftover events can be found (Wood, 2020).

While the availability of food pantries has grown, there is still a self-perceived stigma associated with their use. In a study by El Zein et al. (2022), the main reason students who were food insecure were not using the campus food pantry was stigma and shame. The suggestions offered by students to increase use of the campus food pantry included a positive messaging campaign designed to de-stigmatize use, supplying more fresh fruits and vegetables and protein options, and, lastly, opening satellite locations and offering online ordering to increase accessibility (El Zein et al., 2022).

Meeting the needs of food insecure students is important for colleges and universities to address as it is fundamental to health and wellbeing. As Amanda Sprangler, a lecturer in Plant Sciences at the University of Tennessee, notes, "Forgoing an opportunity to

earn an income so that you can be a student, it can be really difficult to make ends meet—much less get healthy food and vegetables" (Alapo, 2024, para. 4).

Smart Lockers for Food Security

Campus lockers used for parcel and library material deliveries can also be used for food pantry deliveries. In the U.S., over three hundred institutions of higher education are using smart lockers on their campus. One main driver in the uptick of smart lockers is the desire to address food insecurity on campuses. Many colleges and universities have adopted this technology to provide 24/7 meals and groceries. Institutions of higher education using this technology include the University of Florida, Valencia College, The University of Alabama, Shenandoah University, Ohio University, the University of Houston, and the University at Buffalo (Quadient, 2025).

Using automated lockers for the distribution of food is a modern way to reach more students experiencing food insecurity (Quadient, 2025). With smart lockers, students receive a message letting them know that the pantry food has been placed in a locker and an alert is sent when packages are available for pickup. This encourages students to pick up the items when it is convenient and accommodates their busy schedules. This discrete system also reduces stigma and, therefore, should increase the use of campus food pantries and lessen the impact of food insecurity (Quadient, 2025).

Seed Libraries and Support of Campus Gardens

At the University of Tennessee, the Libraries provide two seed libraries to take vegetables, fruits, and herbs from seeds to sprouts to harvest-ready produce. Students can get free vegetable, herb, fruit, and flower seed packets along with information about gardening activities from the University of Tennessee Libraries (Alapo, 2024).

At the University of North Carolina, Wilmington and University of California, Berkeley, campus gardens are used to grow fresh food that is supplied to the campus food pantry (Tresca, n.d.). A library-sponsored seed library can contribute to the success of such efforts.

Food Drives and Drop-off Locations

At the University of Florida, Library West, in Gainesville, Florida, there is a campus pantry drop-off location. The items collected include basic staples such as canned or jarred fruit and vegetables and easy-to-prepare meals as well as hygiene products (University of Florida, 2025). The campus pantry is part of a larger effort that includes the Hitchcock Field and Fork Pantry and Field and Fork Farm and Gardens, which give students opportunities to grow food in intensive production fields and provide for those in need by working to grow fresh and healthful food (University of Florida, n.d.).

There are programs in the literature for food drives that forgive library fines in exchange for canned food and hygiene items (Goodson et al., 2021; Hatem, 2025). Designed with the intent to reduce the burden of fines and support the local food bank or pantry, these programs have limitations such as not addressing the root cause of food insecurity and asking the people who are possibly in-needed to provide the supply of goods. Another

approach is encouraging donations from the entire community and applying fine forgiveness to all accounts in the system (University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2026). Interestingly, there is also a growing trend in libraries to do away with fines altogether to create greater equity (Smith, 2024).

Methods

In the winter of 2025, the authors distributed an online survey through library listservs and email. The mixed methods survey was approved by an Institutional Review Board and included single selection, multi-choice, and open-ended questions. Data was collected for approximately 30 days. The respondents were anonymous and no identifying information was collected. Respondents were qualified to complete the survey if they were over 18 years of age, worked in a library, and agreed to accept the risks associated with completing an online survey. Once the data was collected, themes were named for the qualitative data, and the textual content was categorized and quantified in a Google spreadsheet. Likewise, the quantitative data was tabulated in a Google spreadsheet.

Results

Of the 61 respondents to the survey, 6 stated that their libraries did not support food security efforts; therefore, data from 55 respondents were analyzed. The respondents were distributed between library types, with 28 respondents from academic libraries and 27 from public libraries. Library personnel were asked what types of services they provided to support food security efforts. Services were categorized as direct if food was provided and indirect if information sharing or seed sharing was the primary focus. Respondents could select from 13 service types and an additional category. The four most widely reported service types for academic libraries were (1) promoting the campus food pantry, (2) providing snacks during finals, (3) hosting an on-site food pantry, and (4) participating in food drives. The four most widely reported services for public libraries were (1) providing summer meals and after-school snacks, (2) participating in food drives, (3) offering a seed library, and (4) hosting an on-site food pantry (see Table 1).

Table 1
Food Security Services.

Services	Academic	Public	Type of Service
Pantry Promotion	21	0	Indirect
Food Drives	15	19	Indirect
On-site Food pantry	16	15	Direct
Seed Library	3	16	Indirect
Finals Snacks	19	0	Direct

Summer Meals	0	11	Direct
Cooking Classes	0	10	Direct
Community Garden	1	9	Direct
After-school Snacks	1	9	Direct
Other	8	8	Other
Fresh Food Fridges	7	4	Direct
Emergency Food Info	2	5	Indirect
SNAP Classes	0	3	Indirect
Campus Lockers	1	0	Direct
Sum of Services	**94**	**109**	

Respondents could select from a variety of funding sources for their programs (Table 2). Private and nonprofit financial support was the most common source among both library types.

Table 2
Funding Sources for Food Security Efforts.

Funding	Private/Nonprofit	Government Funding (Fed, State, Local)	Library Funding	Other/Unsure
Public	27	7	17	4
Academic	15	1	13	19

A variety of challenges were noted by library personnel providing food security services (Table 3). Funding was the most common challenge that libraries faced, which included running out of supplies too quickly, inconsistent funding or cuts to funding, and relying on employee-funded donations. Four respondents noted that funding or donations were coming from library personnel, with one respondent noting that they personally funded student meals by buying snacks and meals that could be quickly heated when they noticed student workers were skipping meals or going hungry.

Stocking was also noted as a challenge. This included working with the donations and keeping quality control such as checking end dates and finding damaged or opened items. Issues with the labor needed to work with pantry and donation items were noted, as well as recruiting volunteer labor and working with a changing pool of volunteers from partner organizations.

Another challenge was space. Some libraries lacked the necessary space to collect and store donations or provide an on-site pantry. Outreach and marketing were issues, as some respondents noted that they had difficulty getting the word out about the services, lacked marketing skills, and the hours of operation were a challenge (Table 3).

Table 3
Challenges Identified in Providing Food Security Services.

Challenges	Total	Academic	Public
Funding	21	11	10
Stocking (quality control, volunteer labor)	6	2	4
Space limitations	6	2	4
Outreach and Marketing	5	2	3
Other	2	0	2

When respondents were asked how they overcame challenges, a frequent response was that the challenge stayed, but they continued in the face of the challenge such as insufficient funding, changing service providers, or the supply not meeting the demand. Where libraries had success was in increasing their marketing to request specific items and expanding their partnerships with outside organizations to increase volunteer labor and supplies (Table 4). In the open comments, respondents shared creative ideas about how to overcome challenges. To address weather conditions and ensure staff wellbeing during outdoor distribution, one library implemented weather preparedness measures, such as "canopy tents" and "extra lighting", to create a safer environment. Other creative adjustments included scheduling pantry hours outside of regular library operations, using Amazon wish lists to streamline donations, and narrowing their targeted service groups to reach those most in need.

Table 4
Strategies to Overcome Challenges.

Overcoming Challenges	Total	Academic	Public
Challenge Remains	13	8	5
Increased Outreach and Marketing	9	3	6
Expanded Partnership / Increased Volunteers	9	1	8
Other	6	4	2

Discussion

This section outlines key questions to consider when starting food support efforts. In multiple comments in the survey, individuals noted that food insecurity was a significant

problem that could feel overwhelming. The Food Security Initiative Planning Questions will help you break down the issue of food insecurity into smaller pieces and select a strategy that your library can help your community overcome. To begin food support efforts, libraries can begin with indirect services to bypass intimidation based on the enormity of the issue. Simple initiatives like hosting a SNAP enrollment program, partnering with a local college or university for a social work intern, or distributing information sheets for nearby pantries allow libraries to provide immediate value without the logistical responsibilities of direct services that require refrigeration or food storage. As your library grows comfortable with indirect methods, it can gradually scale towards direct methods, such as setting up an on-site pantry or collaborating with organizations to host regular food distribution events.

As your library team consider the following preliminary questions, consider starting small and with indirect services (Table 1). As you progress to direct services, Musser (2026) recommends that libraries consider the need to incorporate specialized dietary options such as kosher and halal selections that reflect the unique needs of their diverse communities. As your team evaluates questions 2, 3, and 6, Musser also cautions libraries about “donation fatigue,” suggesting that libraries strategically manage the frequency and timing of their appeals to ensure long-term community engagement and support.

Food Security Initiative Planning Questions

As you work through the following list, remember to collaborate with your supervisor, library team, and current stakeholders to ensure your program is long-lasting:

1. Establish if there is a community need by reviewing your community health assessment (or equivalent data). What are community members' specific barriers to food security (e.g., transportation, language, cost, access to fresh produce, awareness of resources, hours of operations)? You can get started learning more about your community health assessment and factors affecting food security by reviewing your local health department's resources or the United Way’s ALICE report.
    a. Local state, county, or tribal health departments periodically conduct a community health assessment (CHA), formerly called a community health needs assessment, to find key health needs and issues systematically. The results then inform the creation of a community health improvement plan (CHIP), which is often available on their respective websites or those of local hospitals. You can name and explore your state, country, or tribal health departments on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) website.

    b. United For ALICE (n.d.) is a collaborative effort by United Way in 35 U.S. states that uses standardized local-level measurements to report financial hardship beyond what the federal poverty guidelines show. Visit the United for ALICE website. Under “State Data,”

select your state (if available) and review the online report or the PDF version.

2. Name existing resources or potential partners. What food help programs and resources currently exist within your community or institution (e.g., food banks, pantries, meal programs, social services, faith-based groups, Friends of the Library groups, academic departments like nutrition or public health)? What barriers might prevent access from underserved populations or might inadvertently alienate specific populations (consider transportation, operating hours, language, immigration status, lack of culturally specific meal options)? Are there target populations that have access to multiple service programs? What are those programs' service gaps? Are there times of year when their donations drop? How can the library enhance those existing programs through its accessibility and reach?

3. Decide on library programming alignment. How do existing programs align with library services or potential educational programs? What are the benefits and disadvantages of those partnerships?

4. Find library space availability. Does your facility have suitable space to house a donation bin, fridge, vertical hydroponic garden, or run a food pantry? Consider storage, distribution, and patron privacy.

5. Evaluate your financial investment. What are the estimated startup costs for proving the program (shelving, initial food stock, seeds, equipment, electricity, marketing/educational materials)? What are the potential ongoing operational costs (e.g., food procurement, storage, potential staffing, or volunteer coordination)? What potential funding sources (grants, donations, partnerships) should the library explore for first and long-term sustainability?

6. Show food sources and handling protocols. How will you source food, seeds, and added resource needs (partnerships with food banks/campus pantries, community donations, or community gardens)? What food safety and hygiene protocols are recommended or needed in your community?

    a. In the 2024 Library Journal Movers & Shakers article, librarian Amber Gagliardi shared how her library got started with their seed lending program. Check out the resources she shared on the Middle Country Public Library (n.d.) website.

    b. Explore your state's extension program and reach out to their master gardener to learn more about local seed and growing programs (Extension Foundation, n.d.).

    c. Learn more about your state's food safety and hygiene protocols, including regulation codes and training courses (Food and Drug Administration, n.d.).

7. Decide program assessment. How will you track the usage and impact of the program, including gathering user feedback and partners' recommendations? How will you share the impact of the program, and how often?

Conclusion

Public and academic libraries both address food insecurity, with public libraries providing food pantries, direct support through prepared meals and after-school snacks for children and adults, cooking classes, seed libraries, and community gardens, while initiatives at college and university libraries focused primarily on students and collaborating with their institution in an auxiliary support role such as providing information, free menstrual supplies, offering food donation bins, campus lockers, and providing information about how to get help. However, in both cases, libraries have purposefully used their positions as essential community service providers to foster food security for their communities.

Importantly, libraries often help others by providing a stigma-free environment and having centralized locations, which may provide greater accessibility via public transportation for those in urban areas. Many libraries also offer extended operating hours. These characteristics position libraries to serve as distribution partners to expand existing food programs run by local food banks, social service agencies, community organizations, or faith-based groups. However, before launching a community fridge or other meal program, libraries should first conduct a thorough analysis of the community's needs. This should be followed by starting conversations with potential collaborators to build partnerships. Exploring the first startup costs and ongoing maintenance models is also crucial, as it is finding the necessary food safety and hygiene protocols and showing clear access guidelines. The Food Security Initiative Planning Questions in the Discussion guides those considering starting or expanding their own program and will help library teams in finding which approaches best align with their specific strategic focus and resources.

Public libraries can begin engaging with food insecurity by reviewing local community health assessments to find specific barriers to food access. These findings can guide partnerships with community organizations that connect families to needed support and resources. Similarly, academic libraries can start by assessing campus needs and collaborating with campus partners to raise awareness of available aid.

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