

2024 East Whatcom Food Landscape Assessment

A Comprehensive Snapshot of Food Access in East
County

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WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



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Executive Summary

Background

This assessment examines food security and access for East Whatcom County residents using qualitative and quantitative methods. This is the region's third assessment, updating trend data from previous assessments.

The primary questions for this assessment answers are:

1. What food is accessible to residents, and how healthy and affordable is it?
2. Where are residents currently choosing to purchase food, and why?
3. What are the most significant changes to the landscape in East Whatcom County over the past 10 years?

Methodology

This assessment is comprised of four main strategies and data sources:

1. Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS)
2. East Whatcom County Community Survey
3. East Whatcom County Focus Group and Key Informant Interviews
4. School District, Census, and American Community Survey data

The Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP) Steering Committee, a team comprised of community organizations and interested parties, provided support and feedback in the design and implementation of the assessment.

Key Findings/Major Themes

East Whatcom County has higher proportions of populations that are vulnerable to food insecurity.

- Over 50% of Mt. Baker School District students were eligible for free and reduced lunches in the 2023-2024 school year, the highest proportion being at Kendall Elementary where 67% of students were eligible, and they averaged 75% eligibility over the past 5 years.

East Whatcom County is a USDA-designated food desert and residents struggle to access healthy, affordable food.

- East Whatcom County still qualifies as a rural food desert, based on the United States Department of Agriculture's definition of "low access" where at least 500 people and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract population resides more than ten miles from a supermarket or large grocery store, and are "low income," where at least 20% of the population is at or below federal poverty level.
- Of the 80 community survey respondents, 60% stated that transportation or cost was a primary inhibitor of accessing healthy food and another 28% indicated that convenience and distance were the most challenging barriers.

Prices of food in East County and Whatcom County as a whole have increased.

- The NEMS data showed that average food prices have increased more in the past five years than in the five years between the first and second assessments.

Accessibility to food is a big barrier for residents of East County.

- Focus group participants identified transportation and the high cost of food as major factors relating to whether they can get the food they need when they need it.
- Key informants explained the lack of feasibility for affordable grocery in East County citing rising inflation costs. Conversely, they explained the expanded options of the Foothills Food Bank expanding the options for East County Residents.

Introduction

In 2013, Lina Pinero Walkinshaw, an MPH student at the University of Washington School of Public Health, conducted an East Whatcom County Food Landscape Assessment with the then Whatcom County Health Department and the Foothills Community Food Partnership Steering Committee¹. The 2013 assessment was a comprehensive look at food access in East Whatcom County and built on the [2011 Community Food Assessment](#) (CFA) and the [2013 CFA](#) update. In 2019, Aly Robinson, an MPH student at the University of Washington School of Public Health and Whatcom County Health Department employee, updated the [East Whatcom County Food Landscape](#)². This 2024 assessment is the third Food Landscape assessment done in East Whatcom County. The assessment includes responses to the recommendations brought forth in the 2019 assessment and provides a current view of resident preferences and insights into food access and availability in this community.

East Whatcom County has changed significantly since the 2019 Assessment. A full-service grocery store has opened in East County and there is an additional convenience store. The addition of a dedicated Foothills Food Bank Building has expanded the distribution capacity of the food bank. While the population of Columbia Valley and East County as a whole continues to grow, transportation is still a challenge for residents trying to access retail in Bellingham. This assessment was developed by Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) interns Aden Houran-Corkum and Kristy Matta, with the support of Ali Jensen and Aly Robinson to understand more about the impact of these changes on community health. The Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP) Steering Committee partnered with WCHCS in this effort. The FCFP's purpose is to mobilize the community around a common vision of "All foothills residents are fed, nourished, and have the resources to access the food they need."³.

Research Strategies

The East Whatcom Food Landscape Assessment is comprised of four main strategies and data sources:

1. The Nutrition Environment Measures Survey
2. An East Whatcom County Community Survey
3. A focus group and key informant interviews held in East County
4. Census and American Community Survey Data

These data sources and research strategies were chosen based on their usage in the 2013 and 2019 East Whatcom County Food Landscape Assessment and their ability to inform the learning objectives of the FCFP and WCHCS.

Geography

The geographical scope of this Assessment corresponds with three major designations, with minor variations. See the Appendix for visuals.

1. US Census Tract 101
2. The Mt. Baker School District Catchment Area
3. The East Whatcom Regional Resource Center Service Boundaries

The focus remains on the East County Census Designated Places (CDPs), the economic and population hubs of East County.

This report is intended to inform the FCFP, WCHCS, and community members about food access and food security in East County. It will be used in the planning and preparation for a Foothills Food Summit in the Fall of 2024.

After the 2019 Assessment was completed, the FCFP convened the Foothills Food Summit to launch a community planning process. The input from the Summit laid the foundation of the updated [2021 Foothills Food Access Plan](#).

Literature Review

The objective of this literature review is to provide background on food deserts and the scope of food security. This review builds on the 2013 East Whatcom Food landscape review done by Lina Walkinshaw¹ and the updated 2019 literature review conducted by Aly Robinson for the 2019 East Whatcom Food Landscape Assessment².

Food Deserts and Food Security

East Whatcom County is designated as a food desert, residents lack access to grocery stores and other food retail, and the rural stores in East County have higher prices and lack variety^{1,4}. Food security is the intersection of food availability and access, including additional resources that make food more accessible⁵. Households are considered food secure when there is consistently enough food to nourish all members of the household

independent of how it was obtained⁶. Proper food access requires that individuals have the income necessary to purchase or otherwise obtain, including transportation, the appropriate food to maintain a healthful diet.⁷.

Measures of Food Access

Communities across the United States face various levels of food access. To classify the different communities the USDA created an Atlas in 2015, which was updated in 2019, and provides a nationwide view of tracts (subdivisions of the county with a population size averaging 4000 people⁸) lacking food access⁴. Tracts are designated as Low income (LI) if they meet either criteria: either a tract is at a poverty level of 20% or higher or the median family income is less than or equal to 80% of that of the median state-wide family income or metropolitan area⁷. Tracts meet Low Access (LA) if 500 people or 33% of the population, whichever is larger, are more than ½ mile or more from a grocery store⁷. There is an augmented definition for LA in rural communities like East County which increases the distance from ½ a mile to a grocery store to 10 miles to a grocery store⁷.

Funding

Food assistance programs are essential for providing food-insecure individuals and families with access to food⁹. In 2023, federal spending on food assistance totaled 116.4 billion dollars, according to the USDA Economic Research Service. This spending marked a 13% decrease from 2022 and 17.8% from 2021, respectively. However, when compared to the 2019 budget, 2023 spending was 54.5% higher⁹. Funding has decreased since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and year-over-year decreases can be partially attributed to the loss of emergency benefits⁹. While SNAP spending decreased between 2022 and 2023 there was a 2.3% increase in SNAP participants⁹.

Food insecurity is not a food issue, it's a poverty issue¹⁰. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the primary distributor of food assistance benefits in America¹¹. In 2023 12.6% of Americans received SNAP benefits, and of those who received benefits, a majority self-reported being food insecure^{11,12}. Having established food resources enables individuals to access food that they may otherwise not be able to access. In 2023 alone, 112 billion dollars were allocated as SNAP benefits¹¹. Without these resources, individuals may not prioritize food within their limited budgets¹¹.

Studies show that while access to quality healthful food is a priority for many people who are living in poverty, other needs often trump purchasing healthful food or food at all.^{2,10} Food insecurity is an indicator of the need for different resources, in addition to a need for food¹⁰ Therefore, investment in food distribution is not a long-term solution. Redistributing funding from food purchasing to areas like education and other partnerships may promote long-term increases in food security¹⁰.

Food Access

Grocery stores are widely observed as the core destination where people receive a majority of their food¹³. In the US, people get two-thirds of all calories from grocery stores. The lack of proper access to a grocery store could leave a community searching for these calories elsewhere¹³. Free and reduced school lunches are a significant indicator of food insecurity in a community, however, recent trends have shown that on average school lunches have gained significant dietary quality when compared to all other major US food sources¹³.

Health Outcomes

Food insecurity and poor nutrition are risk factors for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease¹⁴. Furthermore, the lack of reliable food access is a leading cause of chronic illnesses in the United States¹⁴. Eating a healthy diet is proven to decrease your susceptibility to many chronic noncommunicable diseases as well as improve your overall quality of life¹⁵.

What's changed since 2019

COVID-19 has widely changed the Washington state food landscape⁶. The state saw decreases in all areas of the food supply chain, not limited to the restaurant supply chain, wholesale agriculture, farmers, and food assistance programs like school lunches and food banks⁶. Food insecurity was a health and economic factor for many Americans before the pandemic, however, low-income residents were disproportionately affected during the pandemic as a result of a loss of jobs in low-income sectors⁶. These jobs have also been the slowest to return to pre-pandemic levels⁶. Food itself has gotten more expensive. According to previous trends, food security may take up to ten years to recover from pandemic lows⁶. Unemployment and government assistance also spiked during the pandemic and while unemployment has decreased back to pre-pandemic levels, the heightened usage of government and nutrition assistance like SNAP and WIC has remained high⁶. A change to SNAP benefits in 2020 allowed recipients to use their benefits to purchase groceries online, which in 2023 resulted in 8.8% of all SNAP redemptions being done online⁹.

Locally, East County welcomed the new Foothills Food Bank building in 2020, which has increased its capacity to serve its clients. More recently the Foothills Food Bank in partnership with the Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP) has expanded its food distribution to accommodate an additional distribution day; Thursday evenings from 4 pm-7 pm, where they are now able to serve clients that were not previously able to make their other distribution time¹⁶. The Foothills Food Bank also developed and implemented a mobile distribution with the help of delivery volunteers making food assistance exponentially more accessible for those with disabilities or injuries¹⁶.

Additionally, there was the opening of a new full-service grocery store in East County; the Nugent's Corner Market is located where the Dotsent Corner IGA market was previously located. The opening of this store means that once again there are two full-service grocery retailers in East Whatcom County.

Methodology

The East Whatcom Food Landscape Assessment comprises four main strategies and data sources. The Census, American Community Survey (ACS), and the Washington Public School data (OSPI) informed the background demographic information and the economic background. The Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS) is used to provide a comprehensive snapshot of what food is currently accessible and how healthy and affordable it is. The NEMS survey is a widely used tool to assess the food landscape. In 2013 the NEMS was adapted to best fit the assessment so the same adapted version was used in the 2024 East County Food Landscape Assessment. Using the same adapted NEMS assessment allows for comparison over time with a consistent measurement tool. An East Whatcom County Community Survey was distributed via google surveys and it provides insight into community shopping norms and preferences and resident priorities for food store selection. Two key informant interviews and one focus group were held to garner the opinions of the public and local experts.

Census, American Community Survey, and Washington Public School Data

Social, economic, and demographic data was collected from the 2019-2023 American Community Survey¹⁷ (ACS) 5-year Data Profiles. All data collected is publicly available on the American Community Survey website. Due to small sample sizes and large margins of error for the 2019-2023 ACS data throughout East County, much of the demographic information shared is at the school district level. The Census¹⁸ population data provides a cross reference for the ACS data and provides other economic and health insights not included in the ACS. The Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction¹⁹ (OSPI) data was another useful source, as they track free and reduced school lunch rates throughout the Mt Baker School District, indicating neighborhood family poverty levels.

Mapping of East County Retailers

East County retailers were identified as retailers that had a permanent building with an employed attendant; this excluded farm stands for this evaluation. While we do recognize that there are farm stands and markets that make up a significant source of the retail share, we chose to exclude them from our NEMS evaluation as their score would not reflect offerings due to the constraints of this instrument. Transit routes were

also mapped and were similar to those in 2019, with limited bus service to Columbia Valley and only one bus to the Van Zandt community.

Nutrition Environmental Measuring System (NEMS)

The NEMS assessment is a systematic food retailer assessment that is used to evaluate the price and availability of grocery items at retail establishments. The NEMS tool is a widely used tool that was used in the 2013 and 2019 landscape assessments. Using it in this update allows for the identification of trends over time. There are 13 food product categories, each focusing on a specific group of items you would find in a grocery store, for instance, milk, beef, or cereal. Other categories include common fruits and vegetables. The two produce categories include a quality component where the surveyor has the opportunity to select whether the produce looks appetizing and undamaged (*Acceptable or Unacceptable*). Frozen meals are another category in the survey, specifically the availability of low-fat and traditional frozen pre-made dinners. Frozen and canned fruit and vegetables make up two more categories. Each section has the possibility of zero to three points for availability. For instance, a retailer with all ten available vegetables would earn three points. The other two to three points are scored based on price, however, retailers can also lose points in this section. Say the healthier option is more expensive then they would earn negative one point but if it is cheaper the store would earn two additional points. Points are awarded for item quality only for the fresh fruit and vegetable categories.

Another section that factors into a retailer's total score is the built environment. This section scores; sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, bus stops, etc., and awards points for positive environmental factors that expand accessibility. This section also subtracts points for messaging or neighboring buildings that advertise unhealthy behaviors, for instance, tobacco or alcohol advertising posted outside the store or a bar nearby.

All retailers in our assessment consented to be surveyed. Winco was used in past assessments as a baseline but did not consent to be surveyed for this assessment. Safeway is used as a control in this update.

Two researchers surveyed each retailer and omitted products listed on the shelves that were unavailable or sold out. Prices listed in the assessment were regular list prices. Sale prices were not included. The surveys were done on paper with a clipboard and a pen.

Community Survey

A community survey was used to inform the assessment and garner the opinions of members of East County. The survey consisted of six questions: one demographic question, three food security questions, a question about where people get food from,

and a follow-up question regarding anything else they would like to share. The format was a Google survey that did not ask for any identifying factors except an optional question to provide an email to be invited to the food landscape summit. The survey garnered 80 responses in an approximately month-long timeframe.

To distribute the survey, the Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP) was used to access various networks within East Whom County. The survey audience was primarily residents of Columbia Valley but was open to anyone who lived in East County. Digital and physical fliers with attached links and QR codes were used to advertise the survey. The Foothills Food Bank was a primary location of promotion where fliers were posted to garner the opinions of those who visited the food bank.

The community survey provides insight into resident's shopping preferences and opportunities for and support of local grocers. Residents were also asked to specifically identify stores where they most commonly get their groceries. The stores identified may be different from the stores surveyed for the NEMS, as many residents get groceries outside of East County. Surveys were offered online and were translated into Russian, Ukrainian, and Spanish

Focus Group

A focus group was held to get a better understanding of community perceptions surrounding the food landscape in East County. The focus group participants were recruited through two main channels: an in-person pitch to a local community group and a flier posted outside of the resource center. A total of 15 people were invited to the focus group and four attended, showing a moderate level of attrition. Participants were provided a \$20 gift card to a full-service grocery store for their input. Snacks and drinks were provided as well.

The focus group script was modified and reviewed to fit the new bounds of the assessment, which included five questions, each with supporting prompts. The questions were aimed at eliciting participants' experiences in getting food themselves and the experiences they observed in the community as a whole.

The focus group was approximately one hour long and, like the key informant interviews, it was recorded, transcribed, and then systematically coded by both interns in Atlas.ti.

Key Informants

In addition to a focus group, the two key informant interviews were intended to garner a greater depth of information regarding the food landscape in East Whatcom. The two

interviews consisted of six key questions with various levels of follow-up prompts for each question. The questions focused on food security and environmental or economic factors that contributed to the food landscape. Both interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and all six questions were answered.

Both interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed using an AI transcription software called Otter.ai. The coding process involved creating overarching themes and assigning relevant codes to the themes. Atlas.ti is a software that allows users to digitally highlight and code relevant quotes and expedites the theming process.

Other Relevant Reports

Farmers Dinner: [The 2021 Foothills Food Access Plan](#) calls for supporting local farmers and protecting local farmland. On January 9th, 2024, the Foothills Community Food Partnership (FCFP) hosted an East Whatcom Farmer Dinner, sponsored by the Bellingham Food Co-op, at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center. The dinner was a follow-up to a brief survey of farmers in the foothills region. At the dinner, 20 farmers and 5 members of the FCFP discussed opportunities to grow hyperlocal markets with Foothills retailers and the Foothills Food Bank. Most farmers own less than 60 acres, develop a wide variety of produce and seeds, and sell to a broad list of buyers, such as direct-to-customers, farm stands, and grocery stores. Most farmers were planning to grow their business in the next 1-3 years. The significant takeaways from the dinner were for the farmers to meet more regularly to share resources and support one another. The FCFP is working on ways to find more markets for local growers.



Photo: *Farmers Dinner*

Food Bank Survey: Summer of 2023 a survey was conducted at the Foothills Food Bank in East County. The Purpose of this survey was to inform the purchasing of the Food Bank in light of its recent addition of a second distribution day and subsequent increase in client load. Of the 85 respondents, 76% identified as white, 8% identified as

Hispanic, 6% identified as American Indian, 3% identified as Black, and 1% identified as multiracial. Respondents were found to primarily speak English, while several spoke Ukrainian, Spanish, and Russian. When asked about their transportation, a majority stated that they owned their vehicle and a higher number of participants opted to carpool compared to using public transit.

Half of the respondents stated that they received more than 50% of their food from the food bank and nearly 20% of respondents stated that they got most or all of their food from the food bank, showing that the food bank plays a crucial role in food access in east county. Food bank clientele requested to have more protein and dairy options. Respondents indicated they were often running out of food. The food bank survey also helped inform the content areas for this assessment.

Food System Plan: Whatcom County developed a [Food System Plan](#) that was adopted by the County Council in July of 2023. This plan outlines the County's goals and objectives and informs the research and development of the East Whatcom Food Landscape assessment. Goals 3 and 4 in the Food System plan are primarily aligned with this report: building a vibrant food economy and ensuring healthy food access for all.

Definitions

East County: For this assessment, East County is defined as the Mount Baker School District catchment area. The terms “East Whatcom”, and “East County” will be used interchangeably throughout this assessment.

Grocery Stores: Also called “supermarket” and “full-service grocery store” for this report. These stores stock a wider variety of foods than convenience stores are larger and have regular hours (8 am to 8 pm).

Convenience Stores: Convenience stores generally offer fewer products than grocery stores, are affiliated with gas stations, and have extended hours.

Food Desert: a defined census tract that has both low access to healthy affordable food and is low income.

FCCP: Foothills Community Food Partnership. This is a large collaborative of interested parties addressing food insecurity and access in the East County Foothills. The Steering Committee is composed of local leaders from multiple sectors invested in mobilizing the community around a common vision of food access and security.



Photo Credit:
Cat Sieh
Twin Sisters Market

Findings

This assessment uses four primary data points to gain a better understanding of East County residents. The population/demographic data was pulled from the 2020 Census, the American Community Survey (ASC), and the Washington State public school data pool. A digital community survey was used to gather baseline opinions and perspectives of residents in East County. The NEMS survey tool was used to capture grocery store offerings and pricing. Finally, there are two qualitative measurements to obtain data from the community members directly; a focus group and two key informant interviews.

Background Data

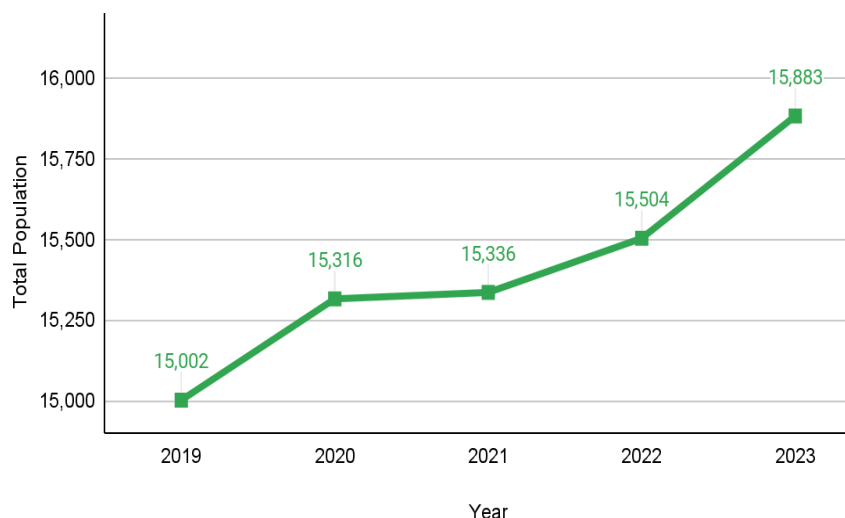
The Whatcom County Community Health Assessment and Mt. Baker Community Health Snapshot reports were adopted from the previous assessment, as it is the most specific population data available. Washington state school data was also a primary source, as it presents higher reliability and less error compared to the census data. Albeit, this data pool is only representative of families in East County with school-aged children and therefore is not fully generalizable. The 2020 Census and the American Community Survey based on that census were the other major data sources that informed the demographic profile, acknowledging the assessment's error associated with small populations. In smaller populations, statistical findings may be less dependable because of the smaller sample size, thus increasing the risk of sampling bias and misrepresentation. For more information on small numbers see the [Washington Guidelines on Small Numbers](#) (Wasserman & Ossiander, 2018)²⁰.

Demographic Data

The Mt Baker school district catchment area roughly represents East County as it includes:

Kendall, Peacefully Valley, Pleasant Valley, Maple Falls, Glacier, Deming, Van Zandt, Nooksack Corner, Acme.

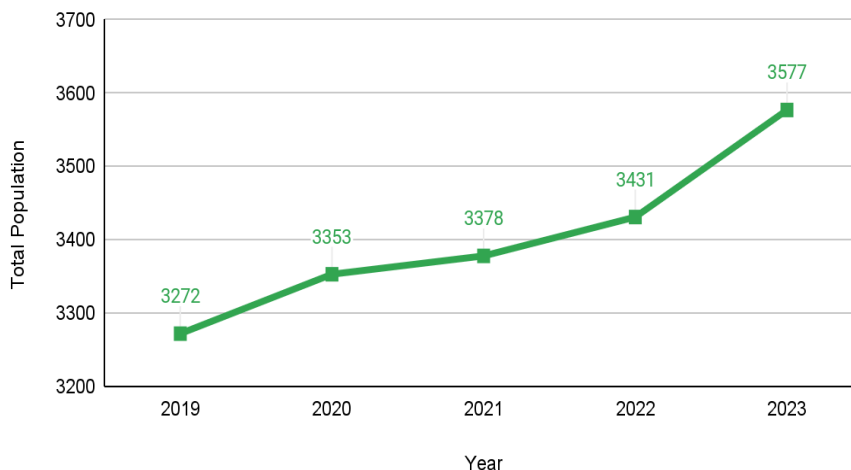
Mt Baker School District Population 2019-2023 ACS Data



In the five years since the previous assessment was done, the population of the Mt Baker school district catchment area grew from 15,002 to 15,833 residents. That is an increase in population of 5.5% over five years, which is similar to the 5.3% change in population overall for Whatcom County. Columbia Valley is designated as an Urban Growth Area (UGA) and has

seen significant population growth in the past five years, with a nearly 9% increase, keeping the trend with previous years' growth as shown in the graph to the right. Furthermore, this area is slated for the development of over a hundred new homes in the coming years.

Population of Columbia Valley Urban Growth Area 2019-2023 ACS Data



Economic Indicators

Economic Indicators provide a background on the vulnerability of a given community. Free and reduced lunches are a primary indicator for this survey, as it most accurately represents the vulnerability of at-risk populations in East County.

In 2019, Kendall Elementary had the highest rate of free and reduced lunch eligibility in the district. This remains true in the 2023-2024 school year, where Kendall Elementary reported 67% of students on free and reduced lunch. Eligibility at Kendall is down from a high of 84% during the 2021-2022 school year. Mt Baker Junior High (the only junior

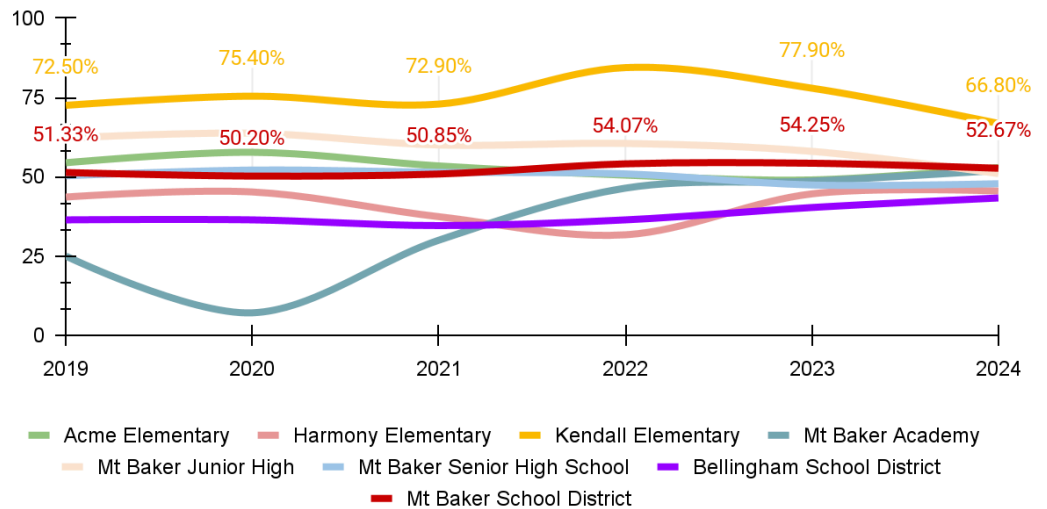
high school in the district) had an average of 59% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch over the past six years, which is significantly higher than the Bellingham school district (in purple) which had lower rates than all other schools except Mt Baker Academy 38% vs 35%.

However, Mt Baker Academy uses a homeschool education model and has had variable enrollment for the majority of the past five years.

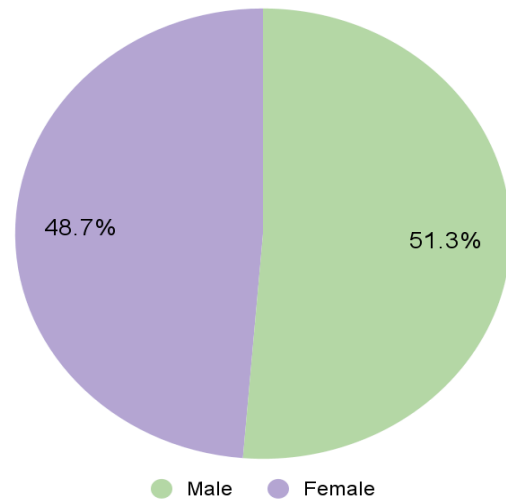
East County is also estimated to have a 15% lower household income compared to the rest of the county. The confidence interval shows a large bound of household income for East County and suggests that this data is not overly generalizable.

Gender in East County is roughly the same as it was in 2019 with approximately 49% female and 51% male.

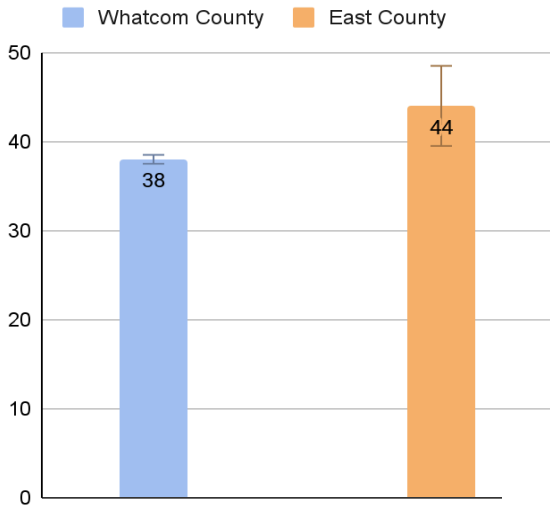
Percentage of Students on Free and Reduced Lunches



Gender East County 2020 Census



Average Age 2020 Census

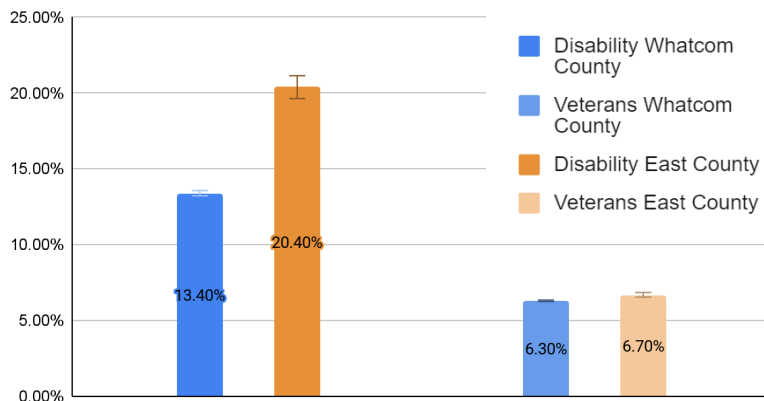


The average age of East County residents is higher than Whatcom County. Both Whatcom County and East County have increased since 2019 where the average age was 42.7 for East County and 36.8 for Whatcom County.

The disabled population has increased in East

County which was 15.6% in 2019 and now sits at 20.4%. The veterans population is statistically different than in 2019 however sampling bias is likely relevant in the 2020 Census.

Disability and Veterans Percentage 2020 Census



Mapping East County

East County is a rural community that lies east and northeast of Bellingham. East County includes the Census Designated Places (CDPs) of Peaceful Valley, Kendall, Maple Falls, Glacier, Deming, and Acme. The neighboring cities of Everson, Nooksack, and Sumas are referenced in this report, as East County residents have cited that they shop for groceries in these locations.

A majority of East County residents live outside of the Urban Growth Area of Columbia Valley.

Transit: The 72x bus shown in brown in the figure below runs from Bellingham Station and goes out to Peaceful Valley via Mt Baker Highway. In 2019 the transit options were similar to the current route with the 72x stopping once in Van Zandt at 5:30 pm and providing no service to Graham’s Store in Glacier or Crossroads Grocery in Maple Falls. However, with the addition of the food bank, there is now a stop at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC). The bus ride from the EWRRC to Bellingham

Station takes approximately 75 minutes and runs every other hour, compared to a 40-minute commute by car. Furthermore, there is no direct route to the grocery store in Everson from Columbia Valley. In late 2020 the new Nugent's Corner Market opened where the Dotsent Corner IGA market was previously located. With the addition of this new retailer, the Everson Market is no longer the only full-service grocery store in East Whatcom.

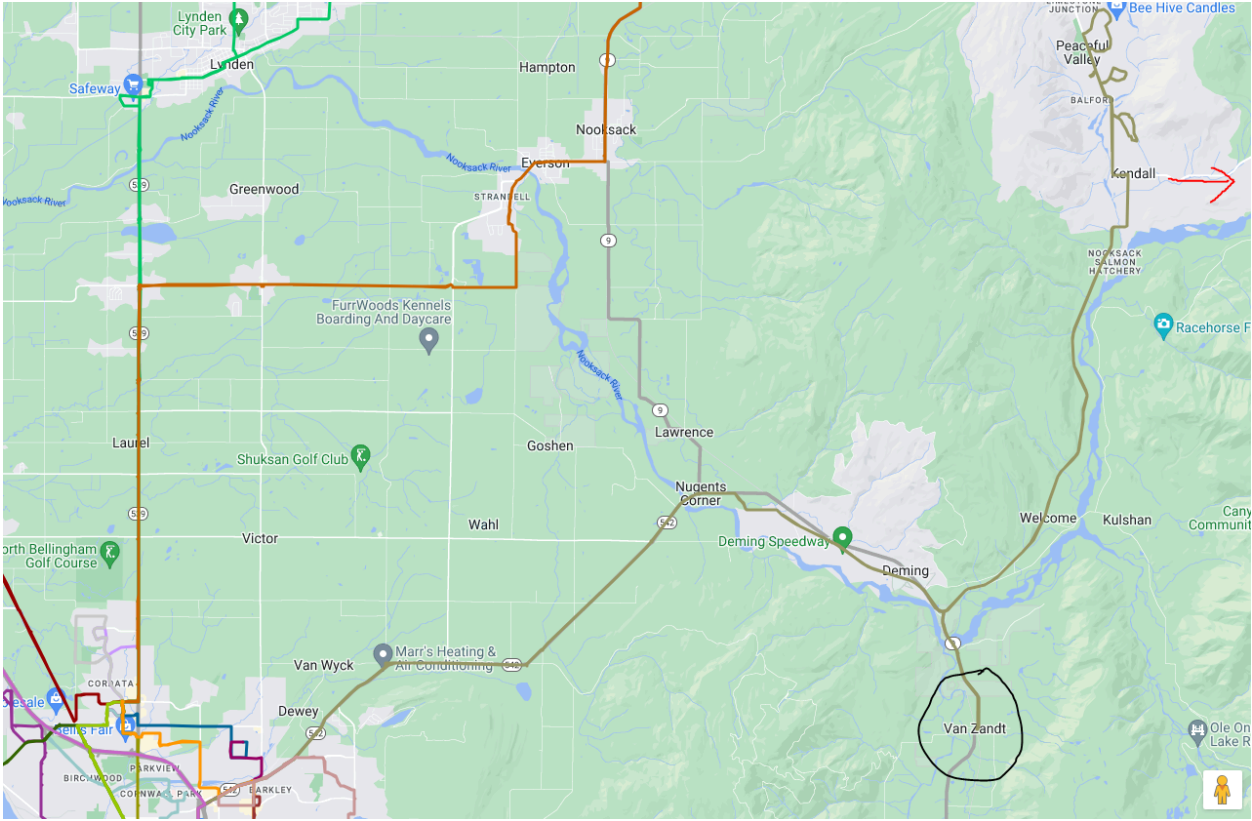
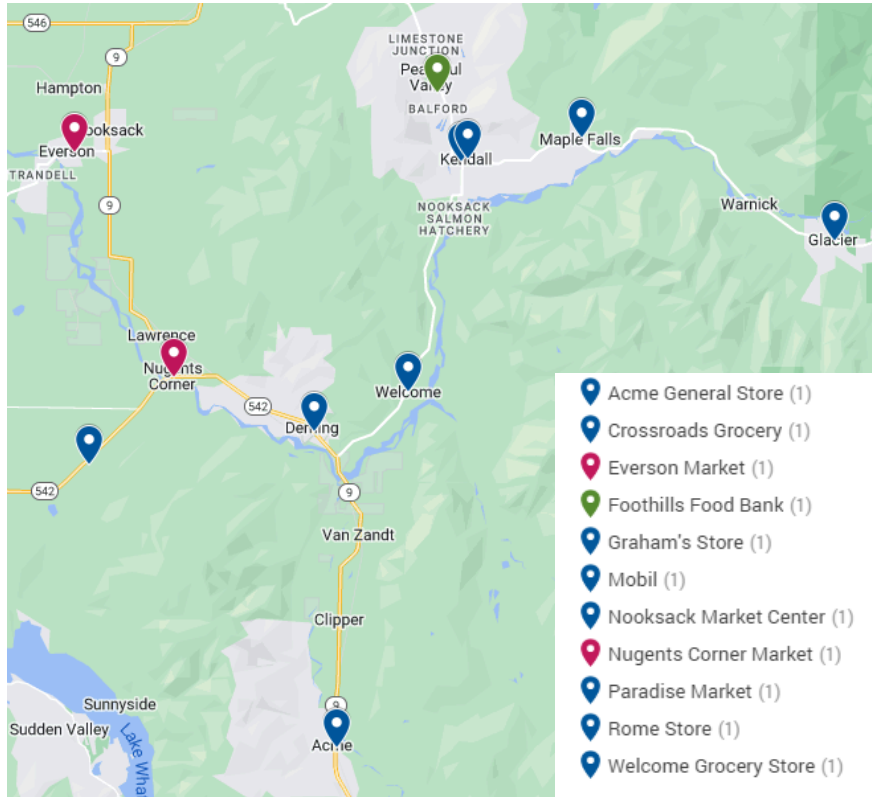


Figure above: WTA Transit map.

The brown line is the 72x bus, the orange is the 71x bus that leads to a major grocery retailer in the nearby city of Everson.

Retailer Location

There are a total of ten food retailers in East County, eight of which were classified as convenience stores. Nugent's Corner Market and Everson Market are the two full-service grocery stores and are located between 12 to 15 miles away from Columbia Valley.



Crossroads Grocery is centrally located in Maple Falls and has an enhanced selection compared to other convenience stores in the area. Since the 2019 assessment, there has been the addition of a full-service grocery retailer and the loss of a convenience store in the region.

The Figure at left depicts the location of all the retailers in East County in blue are Convenience Stores in red are Grocery Stores, and in green is the Foothills Food Bank.

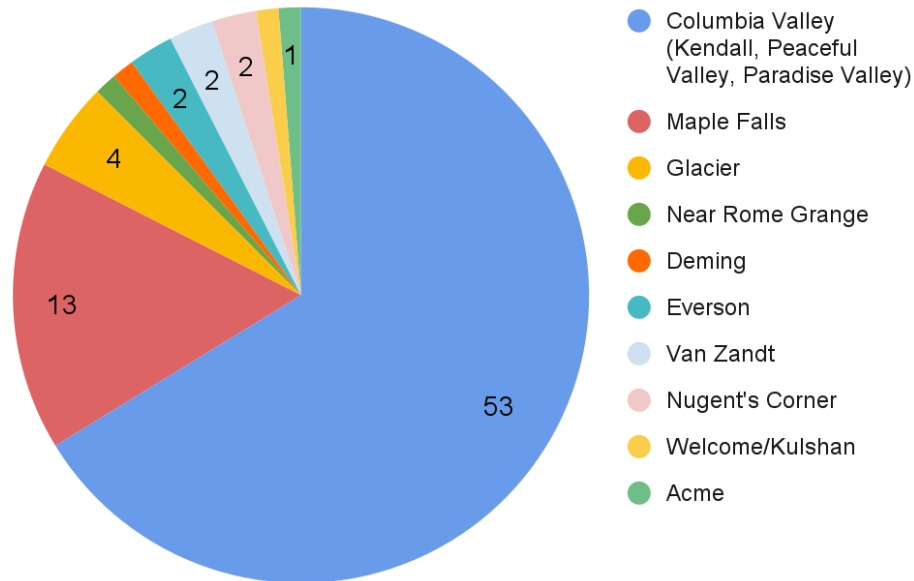


Photo Credit:
Foothills Food Bank
Open House 7/2021

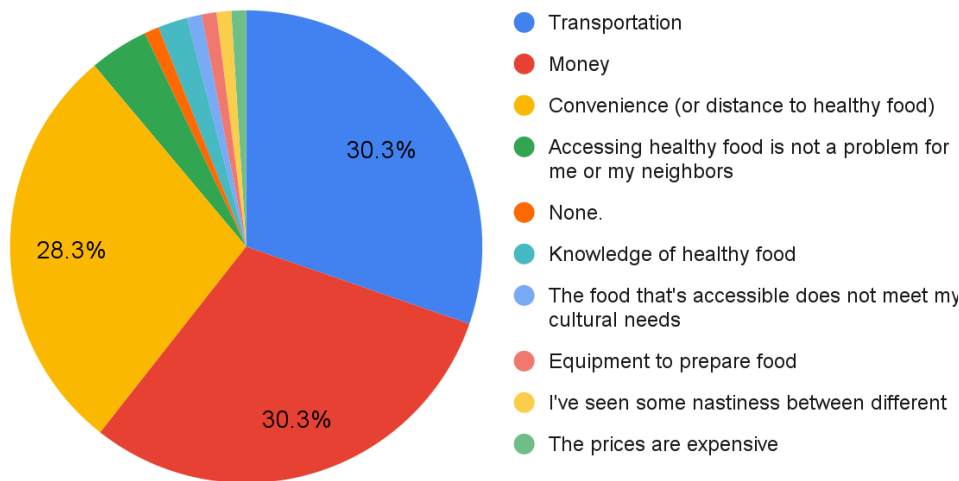
East Whatcom Community Survey

The community survey was conducted by convenience sample on a digital Google form. There were a total of 80 responses to this survey. Compared to 2019, the 2024 survey had fewer questions and focused on determining where residents of East County primarily shopped and why they shopped there. A majority of the responses came from residents of Columbia Valley.

Which community do you live in?



What are some things that make it hard to access food in your community?

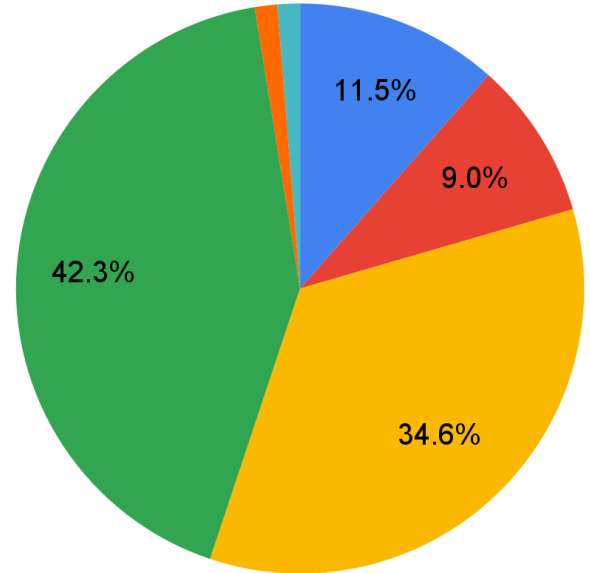


State of Household Food Access

When asked about barriers to food access, respondents chose cost and transportation as primary obstacles which made it difficult for them to access food. Convenience of location or distance to their residence was the third highest barrier cited.

Which of the following statements is most true for your household in the past six months?

- My household had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of the food was not substantially reduced.
- In the past six months, my household reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of our diets but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- At times over the past 6 months eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food.
- My household had no problems or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food.
- In the past six months, my household reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of our diets but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted. At times over the past 6 months eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources fo...
- My household had no problems or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food. In the past six months, my household reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of our diets but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.

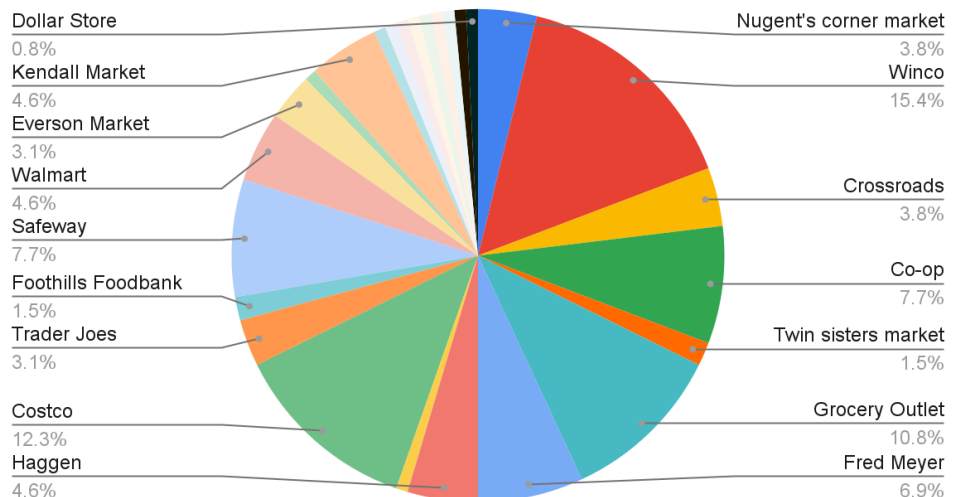


Regarding the last six months, 42% of respondents in East County did not feel that their household was significantly affected by the food landscape. Conversely, 35% of respondents indicated that there was a point in the last six months when there were not enough available economic resources to maintain a regular eating pattern. Furthermore, if we include those who made a sacrifice in quality or variability and those who had anxiety but were not forced to change their intake, we can see that more than 55% of the population is not financially secure enough to guarantee that their families are properly fed.

Grocery Store Preference

Respondents were asked to list up to three stores that they primarily shopped at. In the 2024 assessment Winco, Costco, and Safeway were the most popular responses, followed by Fred Meyer, Grocery Outlet, and the

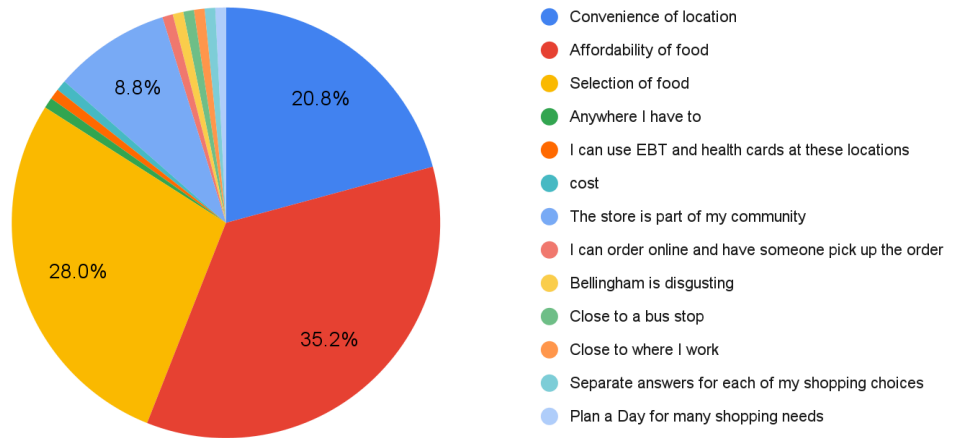
Where do you get your groceries?



Community Food Co-op. This tells us that many East County residents still prefer to do their shopping in Bellingham. However, approximately 4.5% of respondents cited shopping at the newly revamped Kendall Market, indicating that if there is a reasonable selection nearby, some residents are interested in shopping in their community. Furthermore, this chart displays that there is a diversity of preferences among residents of East County, indicating that there is no one-size-fits-all retail experience.

55% of the retailers selected in the store preference graph above are retailers outside of East Whatcom County. In the figure to the right, 35% of responses indicate that the primary driver for store selection is affordability.

Why do you get your groceries at these locations



Combine this with the other 28% who stated that store selection is a motivator for where they shop and this gives us a clearer picture of why residents choose to shop outside of East County. The convenience of location was also listed as another priority for residents, followed by individuals who selected that they plan a day around shopping to make the commute more worthwhile.



Photo Credit: Cat Sieh *Twin Sisters Market*

Community Concerns

The final question in the survey asked participants to leave any additional food access-related comments. Those comments were thematically coded to give a visual representation of the attitudes of the respondents. Affordability emerged as the most frequently occurring theme, with one responder stating:

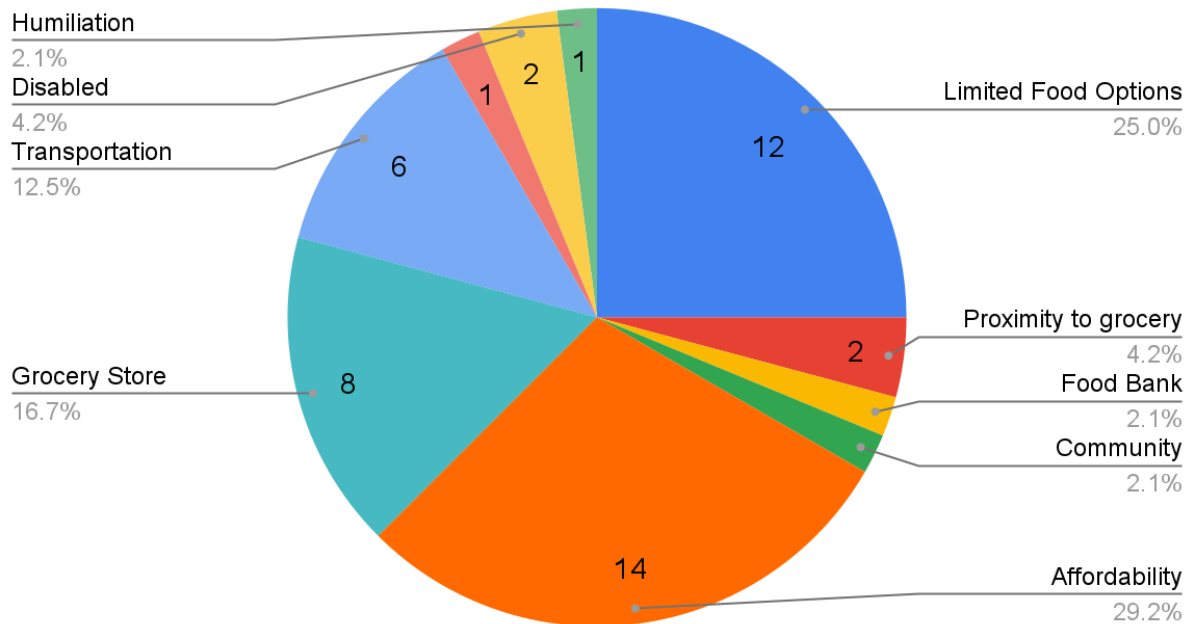
“ The cost of food and the cost of transportation makes it impossible for me to feed my family all month long. By the end of the month, I only eat once a day and my kids eat but are still hungry.”

Limited selection and Grocery store selection were the second and third most popular with respondents stating:

“ I don’t shop in my community because there are no stores that have a good selection of food at an affordable price.”

“ It would make things a lot easier to have a full-size grocery store closer to home. “

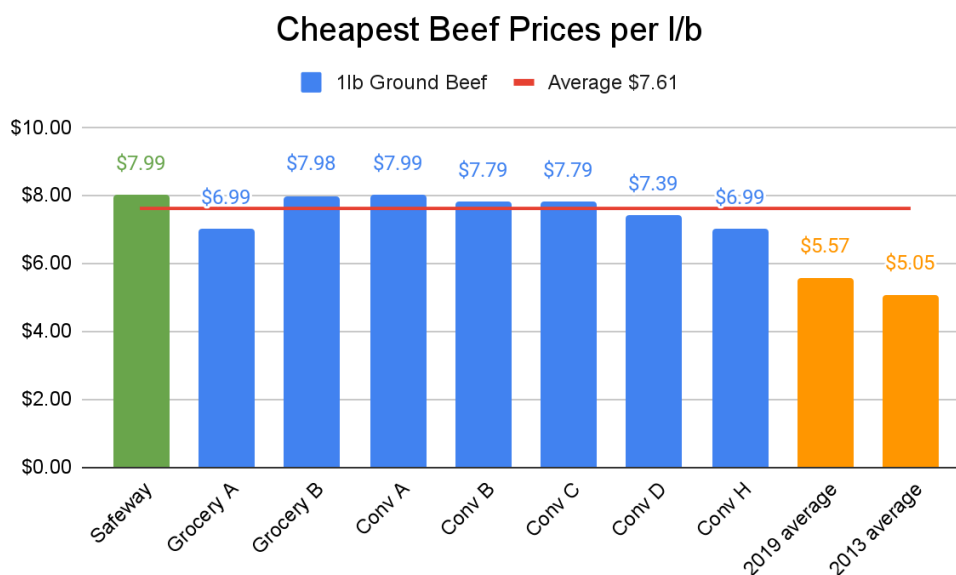
Themes in open ended survey response question



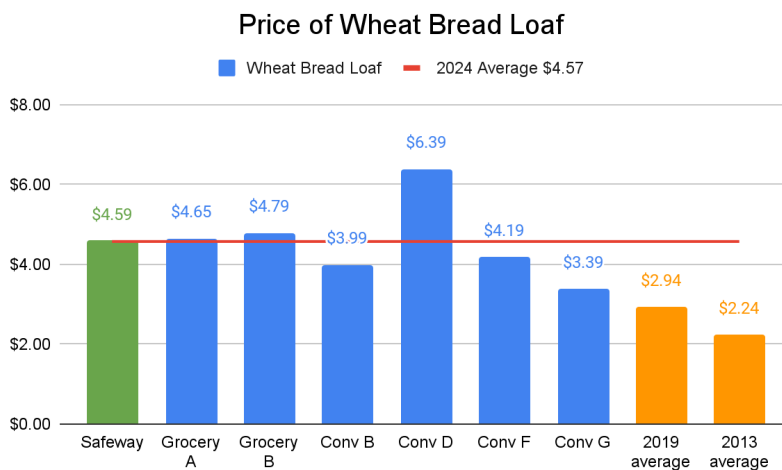
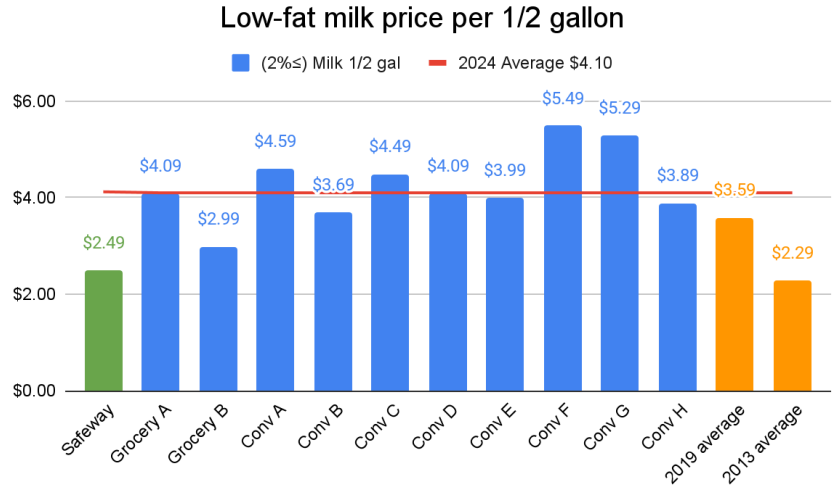
Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS)

The NEMS survey is a tool to measure food items in any given store. Due to East County’s distance from full-service grocers, residents may rely on more conveniently located convenience stores. Therefore, it is important to understand what food items and produce are available in local convenience stores. The NEMS assessment allows us to evaluate food items offered at retailers and the cost difference between East County stores. This assessment was used in both previous assessments, allowing for comparison over time. The 2019 assessment surveyed two grocery stores and seven convenience stores. There was a change in retail offerings as seen in the retailer map above. The 2024 assessment surveyed one of the same grocery stores and two additional, including a full-service grocery store that reopened in East County and the Safeway on Sunset Drive. One additional convenience store opened since the last assessment, so there were eight total convenience stores in the 2024 survey. Below are items that have been consistently supplied in the past ten years at retailers in East County.

The average price of **beef** in 2024 was \$7.61 in East County and the furthest price above or below this is \$6.99 showing that there is a low variance within the price of beef, but compared to 2019 and 2013 prices the cost of beef has risen.

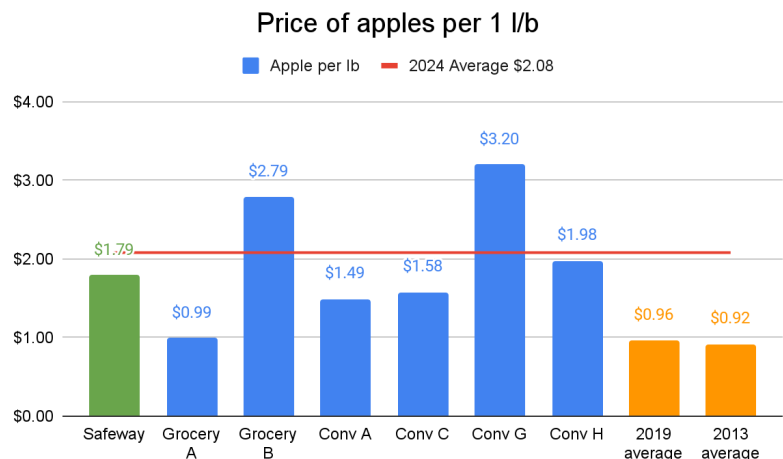


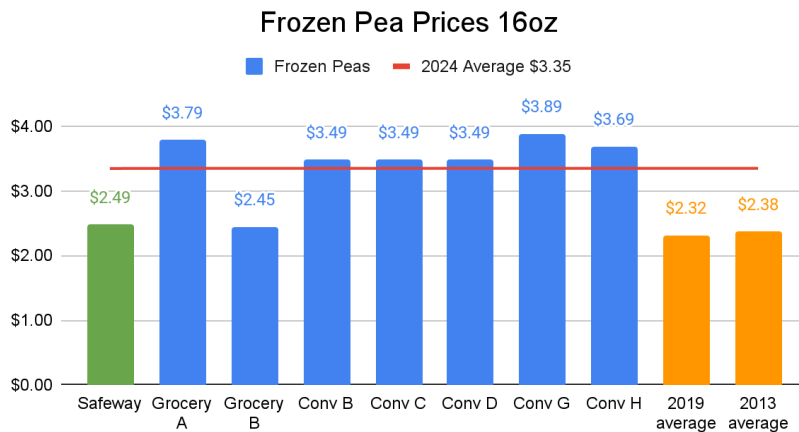
Milk prices have not changed significantly compared to other items. The 2024 average of \$4.10 is 50 cents more than the 2019 average of \$3.59. This exemplifies a smaller change compared to the \$1.30 difference between the 2013 and 2019 averages. Across the board, convenience stores had higher prices for low-fat milk compared to whole milk. Only one convenience store carried 1% milk.



Prices of **wheat bread** have up to a \$3.00 difference between stores. The average cost for 2024 is \$1.61 above the 2019 average, which is significantly higher than the price difference between 2013 and 2019. As compared to Safeway prices, East County retailers charge a similar retail rate for wheat bread.

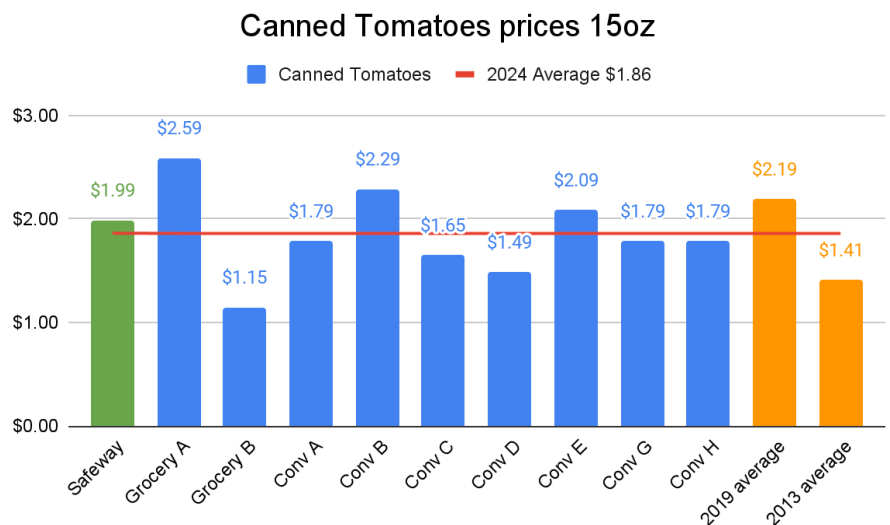
Fruit costs dramatically increased between 2019 and 2024. The average price for **apples** is more than 100% higher than the 2019 average. Many of the convenience stores in East County did not offer any produce including fresh fruit, with only four of the eight stores stocking apples.





Frozen foods increased in price as compared to 2019. **Frozen peas** averaged \$3.35 for a 16oz bag; about a dollar more than in 2019 and 2013, when prices remained relatively the same.

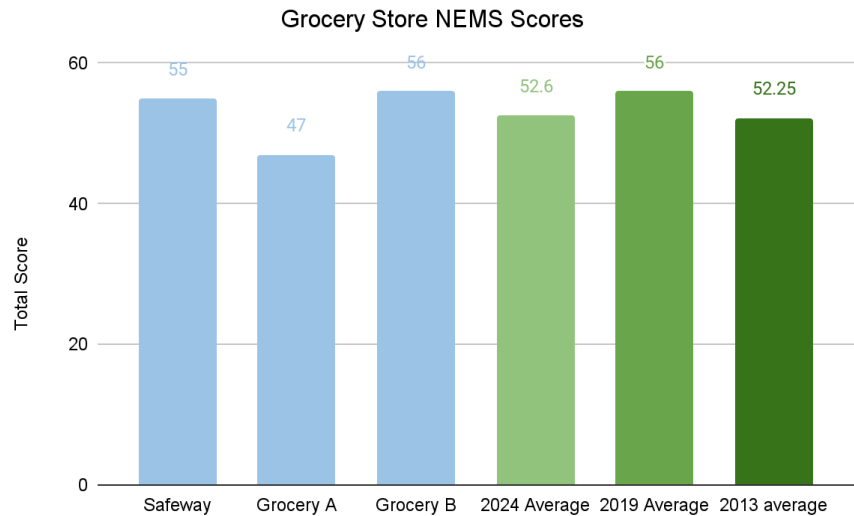
Canned tomatoes were the only product that experienced a price drop. The 2024 average of \$1.46 fell below the 2019 average of \$2.19. The 2024 average price of canned tomatoes more closely resembles the 2013 average of \$1.41. Considering the significant increase in prices across the board for most other products, the decrease in price between 2019 and now may represent some significance.



NEMS Scoring

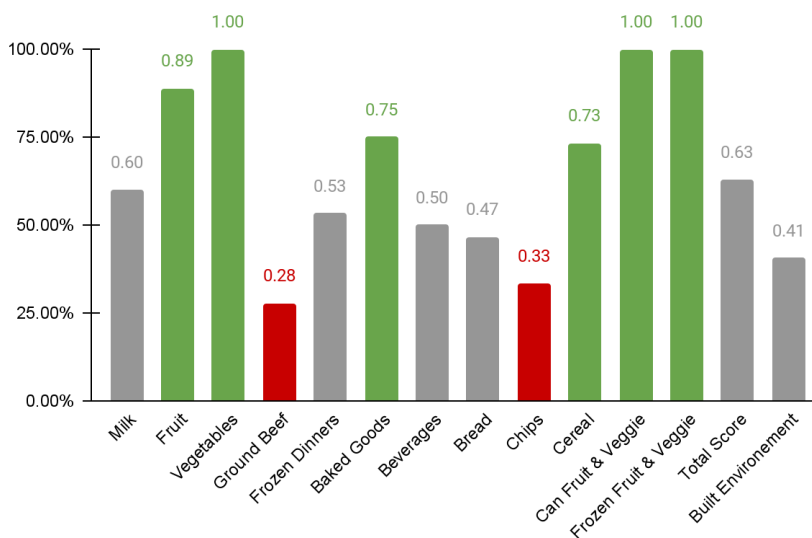
The NEMS assessment is scored based on two criteria: availability and price. If an item is offered, the store receives between zero and three points. If more varieties are offered, the store receives more points. If lower-fat options, such as low-fat milk or lean meat, are priced lower than their higher-fat counterparts, the store receives an additional two points. If the opposite is true, and a higher fat content item is less expensive than a lower fat item, the store loses one point. In addition to price and availability, produce is scored with a quality measure. If 75% or more of the fruit and

vegetables offered are of acceptable quality, the store receives six total points, three for fruit and three for vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are scored separately. Cereal, canned, and frozen fruits and vegetables were also added to the NEMS following this addition from the 2019 survey.



Safeway reflects the control for this assessment as it was a second primary location for East County shoppers, but provided a more realistic price point when compared to Winco. Safeway scored similarly to the other two full-service grocery stores, ranging in the '40s, demonstrating a smaller gap between East County retailers and corporate chains in Bellingham. The average score of 52.6 is a decline from the previous survey, however, there have been other changes to the food landscape in the past 5 years, which may impact food access. Grocery stores reflected minimal changes in overall scores over this 11-year period. Furthermore, between the 2019 and 2024 assessments, the Nugent's Corner Market reopened under new ownership in East County.

Grocery Store NEMS Average Score by Product

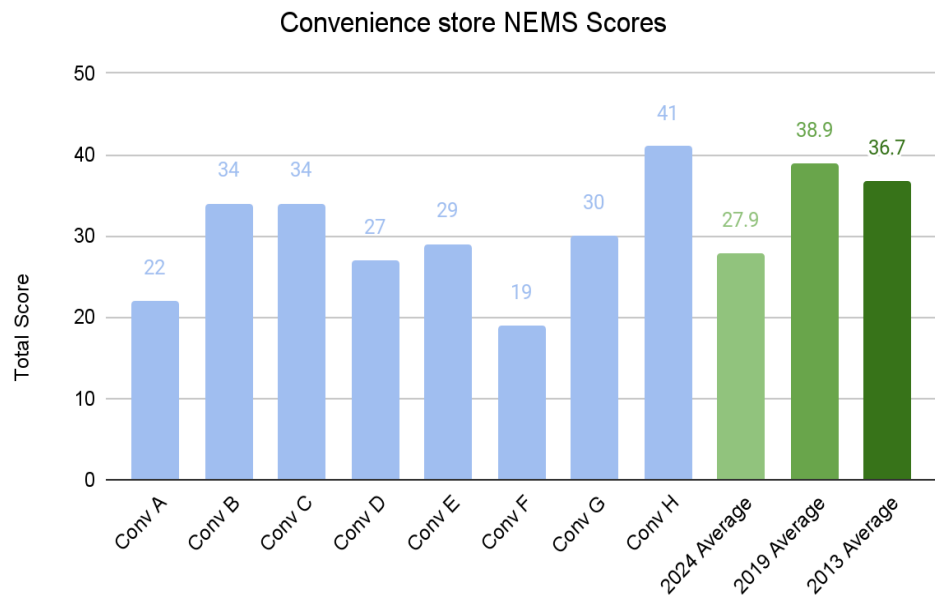


The figure to the left demonstrates the areas of the NEMS where grocery stores are performing well. All the grocery stores had a wide selection of canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, in addition to stocking a variety of acceptable fresh vegetables and fruits. Grocery stores in East Whatcom lack a variety of options for ground beef, bread, and chips. Hot dogs were **excluded** from this figure because no stores

stocked reduced-fat or fat-free hot dogs. Convenience stores were not represented in this figure because their offerings were significantly less than grocery stores.

Grocery store’s scores were comparable to the previous assessment, whereas **convenience** stores experienced a decrease in scores when compared to 2019. While the same survey was used to compare stores in this and previous assessments, sampling methods may have changed slightly as a result of

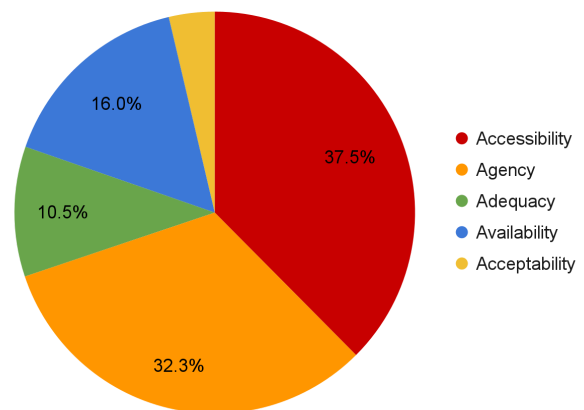
surveyor subjectivity. Furthermore, the stores were surveyed on a Monday after peak weekend tourist usage, so offerings that were marked as unavailable or sold out may be offered at different times during the week leading to different scores. Frozen vegetables and fruits were in low supply in a majority of convenience stores compared to full-service grocery stores, and the built environment was an area of missed points for many of the convenience stores. The quality of offered items at convenience stores was acceptable across the board.



Focus Group and Key Informant Interviews

A large component of this assessment and the assessments in 2013 and 2019 have been qualitative data collection. For this 2024 assessment, a single focus group was conducted in addition to two key informant interviews. Before collecting data for the focus group and key informant interviews a theming guide was created based on the guide from the 2019 assessment. The five A’s of food security

Percentage by Major Theme for Community Focus Group



were identified as our major themes, *Accessibility*, *Agency*, *Availability*, *Adequacy*, and *Acceptability*.

Focus Group

The focus group included four community members and two facilitators and was approximately an hour in length. The discussion was recorded, transcribed, and coded to get a better understanding of community member perspectives.

Major Theme	Accessibility	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Cost	Cost of groceries and the cost of services related to obtaining food.
	Transportation	Traveling to get food or other necessary goods, and the inconveniences associated with the distance needed to travel and the public transit system.
	Socioeconomic Impacts/tourism	The increase in the cost of living and the effects tourism has on individuals living in East County.
	Built Environment	The physical buildings and resources that help or create a barrier for residents accessing food.
	Housing	The cost of housing and the impacts that has on the community.
	Delivery Service	Ideas and previous attempts at providing a delivery service to the community.

Accessibility was deemed the number one barrier to food security by focus group participants with approximately 38% of the discussion pertaining to accessibility and the subthemes in the table above. Accessibility in this context can be defined as the factors relating to individuals' or communities' ability to get the food they need. The most prominent subthemes of accessibility were *Transportation* and *Cost*, each making up approximately 12% of the discussion. Indicating significant feelings regarding the challenges associated with having limited grocery options in East County. Furthermore, participants stated how inadequate public transit and 20+ mile commutes makes traveling to a grocery store without a car impractical and time-consuming even if you do have access to a vehicle.

“I think it is a problem out here because a lot of people can't get food unless it's at the food bank, because it's 25 miles to town.”

“So it is a struggle for, you know, people out here who don't have transportation, and to take public transportation to the grocery store. I couldn't imagine, you know, like, basically, like, it carries two bags. It's hardly worth spending the day.”

Cost is a big factor for residents. Participants emphasized the elevated prices of convenience stores in East County and the cost associated with traveling to the larger grocery stores in Bellingham. Additionally, there was an emphasis on the cost savings of shopping at larger grocery stores outside East County like Costco and Winco.

“It's a toss-up whether you go to town and spend gas money and time or buy local.”

“If I buy two items out here, it would cover my trip. What I just spent extra that from going to town, it would cover my entire trip to and from Bellingham, right?”

“I don't shop really at these little; I hardly ever, because they're just way too expensive. But I don't, I can't, I can't just waste money.”

The discussion highlighted some successes related to reducing the cost of groceries, with participants stating how the prices in East County were not solely reflective of a cornered market but also at the whim of rising costs nationwide. The Twin Sisters market, a mobile farmers market that sells in Columbia Valley on Saturdays, was cited as another area of potential cost savings.

“Yeah, but just show your EBT card. The onions say \$6 a pound. You pay three, pay half the amount, you know, you can't beat that for quality food in a big store”

“I think part of the problem, that why it's so expensive is because their supply chain has upped their prices too.”

Another frequent concept mentioned during the interview was socioeconomic factors that affected respondents' access to food. On focus group member stated,

“I am on a fixed income. I have to utilize the food bank myself because I can't afford groceries. I mean, there's not enough, you know, they don't. I mean, I make too much to get a decent amount of food stamps or anything, which is ridiculous.”

Major Theme	Agency	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Community Involvement	Actions that are being done by the community.
	Community Awareness and understanding	Knowing about available resources and being able to utilize them.
	Trust	Trust or distrust in the local food stakeholders, ie store owners, food banks, etc.
	Highly impacted communities	Communities that are more significantly impacted by the food system and identified by residents.
	Suggested Solutions	Ideas for new actions to improve the food system.

Agency was the next big theme that came up in our discussion. Agency in this context describes community members' ability and authority to be a key player in their own food economy and food system. This includes their ability or inability to partake in the outcome of food system-related discussion projects and politics. Participants spoke to the different levels that the community was or was not involved in the East County food system. Trust emerged as another key factor for participants, citing trusting or untrustworthy behaviors they observed in the local food economy, primarily citing local retailers.

“They don't think of the people in the community who don't have that money and don't have that access to just run to the store, like the people who are tourists coming up”

“And then also they have a little garden out here, and the seniors have another garden. I used to do that until I got COVID, and it's amazing how a little spot of land could produce. A lot of it, I was giving a lot of stuff away.”

The focus group members had a positive outlook mentioning smaller community groups who collaborate to make an impact on local food security.

“You do a little caravan over there. I take, I take _____, or anyone else who needs to go to town, if they need a ride, you know, I usually, I'm usually available because I don't mind driving. I like to drive, and I don't mind going to town”

Personal knowledge of events was an area in which participants mentioned barriers. They discussed the idea of implementing better visual displays like the digital letter board posted by the school. Sharing information via Facebook and other internet channels was also criticized, citing many members couldn't afford internet access at home and spotty cell service made using a smartphone without internet unreliable. A proposed solution was that print media was often the most approachable way to reach a broad audience without making the information difficult to access, specifically mailed fliers or newsletters.

“I guess I'm lucky enough that I don't need a lot of the resources that the Opportunity Council offers. So I had no idea what was going on in the community, right? And, you know, yeah, they have, like, a Facebook page, but you know, you don't think of always going to that.”

Major Theme	Availability	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Desire for New Retail	Residents would like to see more grocery retail in East County.
	Enough Food	Community members cite a lack of the right kinds of food.
	Government Aid	Resources that make food or transportation easier to access.

Availability comprised 16% of the discussion. Availability in this context refers to participants' access to food resources and other basic needed resources. Government assistance came up frequently throughout the discussion where participants mentioned how SNAP benefits had decreased since COVID, yet the prices of food remained high. Later, participants shared how community members often needed to go to multiple retailers to get enough food. For instance, one participant mentioned combining a Costco trip with food bank visits enabling them to purchase cheaper bulk food and also get decent quality fresh produce. Another mentioned the school lunch programs at the public elementary school, stating that,

“So like for the kids who maybe that might be their only meal that they get at school, then, you know, they don't, maybe they don't have a parent that's going to have snacks from when they get home, right?”

“I’m talking about the school districts if they’re to make sure that the kids get fed. Because our school district is in sad shape, they can’t afford printer paper. So how they gonna feed the kids”

Major Theme	Adequacy	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Food Quality	The quality of food leaves something to be desired.
	Sustainable	Behaviors that are the result of inconsistent food access.
	Nutritious	Food in the community is nutritious enough to have the energy to live.

Residents spoke to the link between cost and quality, mentioning that objectively worse food was often the cheaper option, especially when many of the local convenience stores stock little to no fresh produce. Local store prices were also criticized as community members believed prices would never decrease to reasonable levels.

“What they give me is not enough to survive on. So if I didn’t have access to the food bank, it would be hard to find healthy food to eat because unhealthy food is cheaper.”

Major Theme	Acceptability	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Culturally appropriate	Community members can find food that they know how to use and are familiar with cooking/eating.
	Preserving Dignity	Shopping or gathering food or other resources does not provoke unnecessary emotional strain.

The Foothills Food Bank was highlighted as its customer preference model has been well received. Clients are encouraged to take food from the shelves like a traditional store.

Initially, culturally appropriate options were expected to be reserved for food items, but in light of the discussion, they were expanded to include behaviors. Participants mentioned the technology challenges associated with many residents. Another cited the

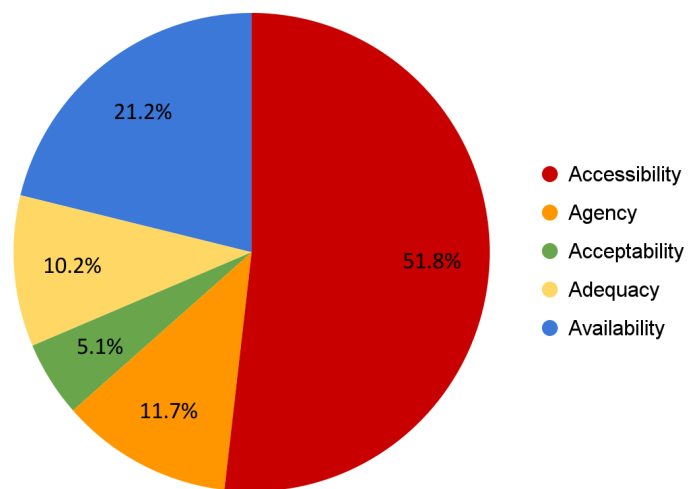
inadequate time window of school lunchtime that would leave their student and other students hungry in class and after school.

“But having lunch there with my son, what I saw was total food waste. Total food waste. The kids came in by the time they came in from recess, and I would sit and eat. I didn’t, I wasn’t screwing around. I couldn’t finish the food that was there.”

Key Informants

Two key informant interviews were done to provide supplemental expertise to the experiences of the residents in the focus group. The two interviews took approximately 30 minutes each and were coded together and averaged for consistency. The key informant interviews were more guided discussions compared to the focus group discussions. The interviews had six questions with follow-up prompts, to make the best use of the informant’s expertise. The theming process reflected these differences with slight changes to subthemes within the major themes as compared to the focus group.

Percentage by Major Theme for Key informant Interviews



Major Theme	Accessibility	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Cost	Cost of groceries and the cost of services related to obtaining food.
	Physical Access/ Transportation	Traveling to get food or other necessary goods, and the inconveniences associated with the distance needed to travel and the public transit system.
	Socioeconomic Impacts	The increase in the cost of living and the effects tourism has on individuals living in East County.

	Built Environment	The physical buildings and resources that help or create a barrier for residents accessing food.
	Housing	The cost of housing and the impacts that has on the community.

Accessibility was the most frequent theme in both the focus groups and in the interviews. However, in the interviews, it was more prevalent at 52% of the discussion. Cost emerged as a leading subtheme, where both informants cited rising costs due to inflation. They mentioned the importance of supporting the local food economy, to keep local growers in business. For the informant interviews, physical access was grouped with transportation, and, like the focus group, the informants described the challenges associated with traveling an hour away just to get groceries. Other emphasis was placed on the offerings at the food bank and the recently revamped Kendal Market, which improved the physical access to food. Socioeconomic impacts also emerged as healthcare access is even more limited, compared to food access. It is inferred that many community members don't have stable access to food or healthcare. Furthermore, the cost of housing was cited as an additional barrier associated with food security.

“price is going up. But it's not really the grocery stores' fault that prices are going up. The general public is really confused by that and doesn't understand that you know, the grocery store doesn't want to jack the prices up.”

“And so because of the price of gas and the time that it takes to get to Bellingham, you think about what do I need to do? And so it's like doctor's appointments or going to the pharmacy because we don't have that here, either. So you think, what do I need to do? And you do it all in Bellingham, And so, it, it becomes a challenge for the retailers of like, how do you compete with wincos prices?”

Major Theme	Agency	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Community Involvement	Actions that are being done by the community.
	Community Awareness and understanding	Knowing about available resources and being able to utilize them.

Agency was markedly less prevalent when compared to the focus group discussion but community involvement was emphasized by both informants. They explained the trajectory of the community dinners that take place at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC) in Columbia Valley.

“The group of people comes in, prepares the food, they serve the food. And the room is set up with like big round tables that have tablecloths on them. And it's like a, you know, a dining experience, but an opportunity for people to come together and socialize and share a meal.”

Major Theme	Availability	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Urban Growth	Columbia Valley is an urban growth area with a steadily growing population
	Enough Food	Community members cite a lack of the right kinds of food.
	Alternative Resources/ Government Aid	Resources that make food or transportation easier to access.

Availability was the second most common theme in our discussions, where the informants described the food resources that had been previously more plentiful with COVID-19 grants and donations. The caveat was that the food bank had progressed to serving more clients now, even more than during the pandemic. Urban growth came up as a factor related to the increasing cost of living, with new development ongoing and increases in vacation homes. There was an implied increase in the diversity of wealth between families in East County.

“So we used to serve prior to COVID between 160 and 180 families a week and we're regularly serving 350 families”

“You know, my partner who grew up out here, I asked him when that really changed, and he said when Instagram became a thing. With Airbnb, because people started tagging the area, you know, like geo-tagging, Instagram posts, and then tourism picked up in that people like, oh, there's cheap housing out here. Let me buy it and turn it into Airbnb”

Major Theme	Adequacy	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Food Quality	The quality of food leaves something to be desired.
	Sustainable	Behaviors that are the result of inconsistent food access.
	Nutritious	Food in the community is nutritious enough to have the energy to live.

Quality emerged as the primary subtheme of Adequacy, with informants explaining the existence of many organic family farms, which indicates healthy food is present on the land in East County, however, it does not always make it to the community centers that allow residents to access that food. The informants explained how the food bank has increased its contracts with local farmers and supplies fresh produce from local farms, which supports the local growing economy and improves access to fresh produce.

“COVID highlighted how important local food is and knowing who grows your food. So we’ve seen an uptick in the amount of local food offered out here and the uptick in the amount of people who are trained to make farm stands more accessible and more robust out here to our population.”

Major Theme	Acceptability	Subtheme meaning
Subtheme	Culturally appropriate	Community members can find food that they know how to use and are familiar with cooking/eating.
	Preserving Dignity	Shopping or gathering food or other resources does not provoke unnecessary emotional strain.

With such a diverse community, and no close full-service grocery stores, the food bank has been stepping up to order a greater variety of produce and proteins to allow residents access to familiar foods. Additionally, the food bank client preference model may empower its clients.

“But even here at the food bank, we had some challenges too. But we have been able to get Charlie's produce to come out here now twice a week, and we're able to meet the minimum order. So we, we have the opportunity to have a greater selection of foods

through a retailer or a wholesaler like Charlie's Produce, instead of just ordering from distributors that focus on food banks”



Photo Credit:
Cat Sieh
Twin Sisters Market

Discussion and Conclusion

East County is home to almost 16,000 residents and continues to grow. From our findings, it's clear that East County residents are still a vulnerable population, with transportation, cost, and convenience being the most prominent barriers to food access. The area maintains its status as a food desert from the initial assessment in 2013 and the updated assessment in 2019. Kendall Elementary shows a slight decline in free and reduced lunch eligibility from previous years, but still displays the highest rates in Whatcom County. The vulnerability of East County residents is exhibited in the increased population of disabled persons and the noteworthy percentage of those who rely on the Foothills Food Bank for a majority of their produce. The revamp of the Kendall Market paired with an uptick in perception of this grocer shows a desire for a store that fulfills the nexus of convenience, selection, and affordability. The addition of this full-service grocery store provides further access, yet affordability perpetuates East County residents to travel the 40 minutes by car (75 minutes via bus) to Bellingham to buy groceries.

When compared to previous assessments, there is a clear increase in the cost of groceries from subsequent years. Availability and quality among full-service grocery stores remain consistent. Convenience store prices remain higher than full-service grocery options in East County. See Limitations for more on NEMS.

A community survey of East County demonstrated a gap in accessibility to food. However, community resilience and connection played a large role in mitigating the lack of accessibility, such as ride-sharing. Focus group participants shared high esteem for the addition of the EWRRC as it has served as a central hub in recent years, providing a place for community members to organize and commune. The Foothills Food Bank and attached garden was also cited as a coveted resource of fresh food for East County residents. The new model of “shopping” for produce, reduces food waste and returns dignity to the experience.

Plans to update the EWRRC kitchen to a commercial level were mentioned as a point of excitement by focus group participants as it would further build community resilience against food insecurity. This would provide a space to cook senior meals, hold SNAP-Ed nutrition classes, and support small businesses as well as youth programming.

Speaking with Key Informants highlighted the importance of enhancing relationships with local farmers and community members and backing the food system with supplemental aid.

Foothills Food Bank's pre-season contracts bolster East County farmers with an upfront fiscal commitment during winter months and increase variety for Food Bank clients. The conversation and relationship between the Foothills Food Bank and local farmers not only provides a space to plan for growing seasons and purchasing but also to share in a commitment to community resilience.

Other programs like Whatcom Grown at Crossroads Grocery enhance WIC-eligible residents' accessibility to produce while simultaneously supporting local farmers and reducing the burden of food and cost waste for grocers.

Facilitating empowerment continues to be the sustaining driver of these reports. From a community health perspective, it's evident that creating relationships and building community resilience has sustaining effects on the food landscape.

Recommendations

1. Support the East Whatcom Community in improving healthy food access:
 - a. WCHCS and FCFP to plan and implement the third Foothills Food Summit to update the Foothills Food Access Plan.

- b. Share landscape assessment and findings with relevant interested parties and partners.
 - c. Promote continued community discussion on food access issues and resilience building.
 - d. Complete the kitchen at the EWRRC to allow residents of East County access to a commissary kitchen.
2. Engage current retailers to determine ways to increase business while meeting community needs:
- a. Facilitate conversations between convenience store managers and/or owners to understand more about price variance and opportunities to improve the food landscape and invest in current retailers.
 - b. Promote the use of local farm markets through awareness campaigns and/or marketing strategies.
 - c. Continue to connect local growers with the local food economy.

Limitations

This assessment encountered a few major limitations.

1. Focus group size and scope: Attendance of focus groups was limited, with only 4 attendees who were all in a similar demographic.
2. NEMS efficacy: The NEMS scoring system is out of date as it doesn't reflect the reality of availability or realistic desire for certain food products. For example, eggs and butter, staples in most homes are not included in the NEMS. Fat-free hot dogs were listed but hard to find, thus the exclusion of this data point. Cost is also not central to NEMS scoring, although it is a pivotal point of access to consumers.
3. Census Data and the American Community Survey informed this survey, but due to the small population size, these instruments are not able to produce reliable statements about race and ethnicity and other crucial demographic information in East County.
 - a. Sampling Bias: The community survey and qualitative data used convenience sampling which may not fully represent a fully objective perspective.

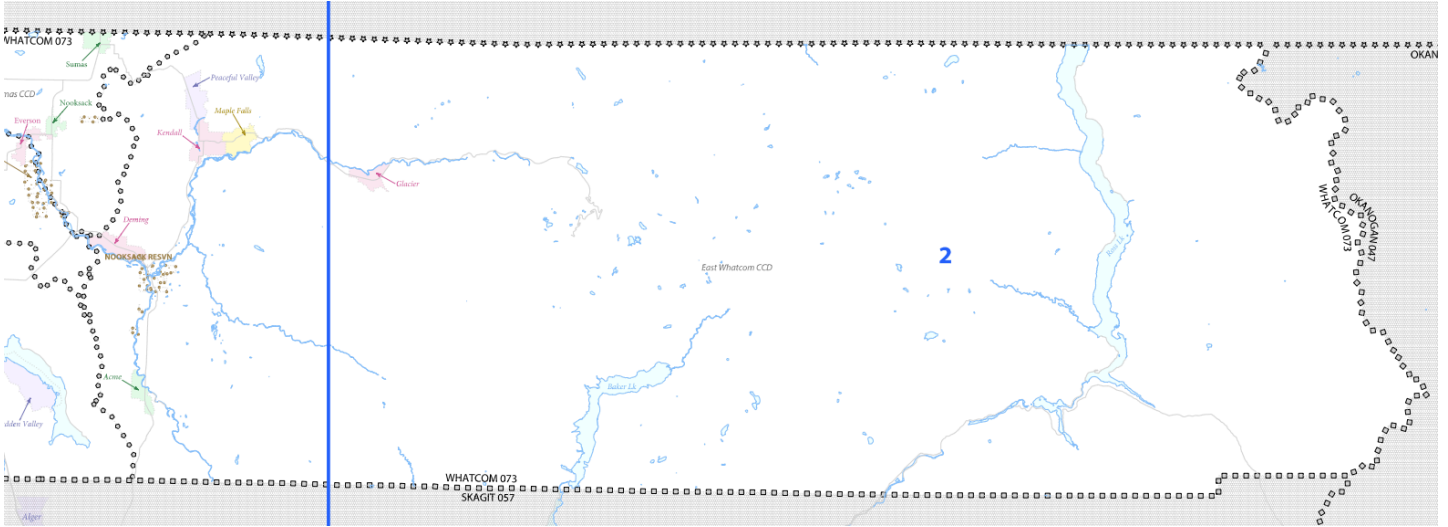
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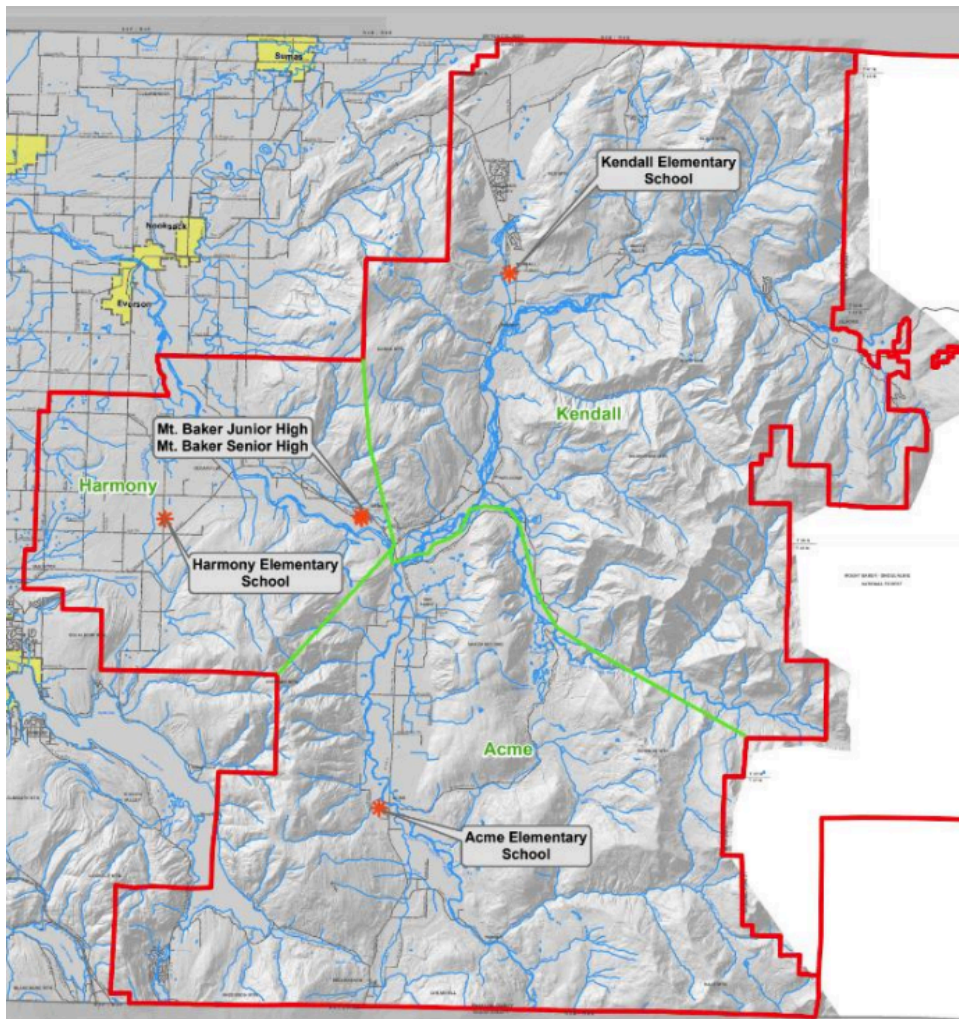
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Appendix

US Census Tract 1 2020 Census



Mt Baker School District Boundaries



Letter to Stores

July 16th

Dear Store Owner/Manager,

Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) is conducting an update to the 2019 East Whatcom Food Landscape Assessment. The purpose of this assessment is to learn about what food access looks like for individuals residing in these areas. We will use the data from these surveys to develop a better understanding of East Whatcom County's food resources, and what we can do to help support increased food accessibility.

Local grocery and food retailers play an important role in providing residents with a healthy living environment. A local grocer is an asset to its community. And a thriving community is good for business.

We thank you in advance for your partnership in helping to make a safer and healthier Whatcom County. If you have questions about the surveys please contact me *Contact Info*

Sincerely,

Surveyors Name

Community Survey Questions

Which community do you live in?

- Columbia Valley (Kendall, Peaceful Valley, Paradise Valley)
- Maple Falls
- Glacier
- Acme
- Van Zandt
- Deming
- Nugent's Corner
- Other:

Do you or your neighbors struggle with accessing healthy food? What are some things that make it hard to access food in your community? (mark all that apply)

- Transportation
- Money

- Convenience (or distance to healthy food)
- Knowledge of healthy food
- The food that's accessible does not meet my cultural needs
- Equipment to prepare food
- Accessing healthy food is not a problem for me or my neighbors
- Other:

Please select the following statement that is most true for your household for the past 6 months:

- My household had no problems or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food.
- My household had problems or anxiety at times about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of the food were not substantially reduced.
- In the past six months, my household reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of our diets but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- At times over the past 6 months eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food.

What are the three (3) stores where you most commonly get your groceries?

- _____
- _____
- _____

Why do you get your groceries at these locations (Mark all that apply)

- Convenience of location
- Selection of food
- Affordability of food
- The store is part of my community
- Other:

Do you have any additional comments on the accessibility, affordability, and availability of food in this community:

Key Informant Questions

Questions

1. In the last five years, a lot has changed in the county as a whole, how has that changed the food landscape in East County?
 - a. **Prompt** tourism? economy? covid? Remote work? housing crisis?

2. What changes to the food retail or food distribution in East Whatcom County have had a significant impact on the population in the last 5 years?
 - a. **Prompt** Built Environment changes
 - b. **Prompt** Food Bank being built

3. How has the quality and price of food available to East County residents changed in the last five years?
 - a. **Prompt** Have the types of foods changed? Local food? Organic food? Is this a positive or negative thing for the community?
 - b. **Prompt** Where have barriers been removed or added regarding food access?
 - c. **Prompt** What kind of changes have you noticed?

4. What are some different ways the community is involved or left out of the food landscape decisions in East Whatcom?
 - a. **Prompt** What are some successes within the community
 - b. **Prompt** Are there specific communities more integrated with the food system?
 - c. **Prompt** Which community groups are working on food security?

5. What are other factors that influence the food landscape?
 - a. **Prompt** Are there any heavily relied upon community services?
 - b. **Prompt** broader systemic issues

6. Is there anything that you'd like to share that you have not had the opportunity to talk about yet?

Focus Group Script

1. Do you think food insecurity is a problem in your area?
 - a. **Prompt:** How has your own experience been accessing food?
 - b. **Prompt:** Who do you think is impacted most?

2. What are some of the biggest barriers you see to accessing food in your community?
 - a. **Prompt:** Can prompt on specific areas if not touched up for example: availability of food, accessibility in getting to food sources, and affordability of food

3. What do you think are some solutions to improve food access in the area?
 - a. **Prompt:** Follow up on specific barriers mentioned in question 2

4. Has your community been doing anything to try and address food insecurity? We are always looking out for innovative ideas and ways communities are showing up.

5. Can you think of any recent successes in the community?