

From Field to Fork: Community Food Security in Oklahoma

Homeland security; social security; household security - security is in the news and on the minds of Americans.

What about food security?

Is America food secure? Is Oklahoma food secure?

How one defines food security determines the answer.

To some people food security equals protection - protecting agriculture from diseases such as Mad Cow, protecting food from contamination by pesticides or food-borne pathogens such as *E. coli*, or protecting food distribution networks from terrorist attack.

People trust government agencies to be on guard and sound the appropriate alarms when problems arise.

Many people simply equate food security with food abundance: if America's grocery shelves are full, as they are, the food supply must be secure.

Others see food security through completely different glasses. To people who work in social services, food security means that individuals have physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs.

In fact, the numbers of households who are food insecure are regularly counted: in Oklahoma in 2004, 15.2% of households in the state had "limited or uncertain access to nutritious, safe foods..."

Members of five percent of Oklahoma households went hungry on a regular basis, ranked worst among the fifty states. This statistic sounds a different kind of alarm.

Food security: same term, different points of view.

In recent years, yet another way of looking at food security has gained currency - "community" food security.

At the heart of the community approach to food security is the notion that as much as possible, food should be grown, processed and distributed locally, making "farm-fresh" goods available to everyone,

including those with low incomes.

This is the exact opposite of how it is now done. Much of the food Oklahomans eat is not grown here, not processed here, and is shipped in from far away. The result: a population increasingly alienated from its food and therefore subject to poor eating habits, obesity and obesity-related diseases. The current system leaves everyone, and especially low-income people, without good access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This system, with its many miles between farm gate and dinner plate, is particularly vulnerable to disruption and the rising costs of energy.

The community food security movement proposes a community, or locally-based, food system as the lynchpin of food security.

What is a food system? The food system begins on the farm and ends at the dining table. It encompasses agricultural production, food processing and distribution, and consumption and nutrition.

A community food system proposes expanded local production of a diverse array of foods, expanded markets for locally-grown foods, more local processing, and more direct contact between farmers and consumers. It supports farms that are sustainable: environmentally friendly, socially equitable and economically viable over the long term.

The goal is to make high-quality, locally-grown food available to everyone, no matter their income level, in the process rejuvenating family-scale agriculture and reconnecting urban consumers with their food and their rural neighbors.

A community-based food system is appealing, proponents say, because it has something for everyone. It goes beyond food handouts to the hungry or subsidies for farmers. It promises fresher, tastier food for everyone who eats and a style of economic growth with benefits that stay home, rather than vanishing out-of-state or overseas.

Community Food Security: A Short History

Traditionally, food insecurity has been tackled on the household level. Government programs, such as food stamps, and private efforts, such as food banks and soup kitchens, have focused on getting food assistance to the individuals and families who need it most.

Despite these strong efforts, rates of hunger and food insecurity in the United States remain at virtually the same levels as ten years ago.

Perhaps because of the seemingly intractable nature of the problem, public health researchers began looking at food security on a different level - the community level - analyzing the quantity, quality and affordability of food available in low-income communities.

Factors that indicate a community may be food insecure:

- There are inadequate resources (such as grocery stores) from which people can purchase foods
- The available resources are not accessible to all community members
- The food available through the resources is not sufficient in quantity or variety
- The food available is not competitively priced and thus is not affordable to all households
- There are inadequate food assistance resources to help low-income people purchase foods at retail markets
- There are no local food production resources
- Locally-produced food is not available to community members
- There is no support for local food production resources
- There is any significant household food insecurity within the community. [1]

In 1996 the USDA launched its nationwide community foods program, which “seeks to forge partnerships between USDA and local communities....” An important part of this initiative is connecting low-income people with fresh, locally grown food. [2]

The Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act (FAIR) of that year established a federal grant program to support the development of Community Food Projects and the farm bill of 2002 reauthorized the program. The program is designed to

- Meet the needs of low-income people by increasing their access to fresher, more nutritious food supplies
- Increase the self reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs
- Promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm and nutrition issues.

The USDA has identified a number of community food programs it sees as important to reducing hunger and food insecurity in the United States. These programs include

- farmers' markets - that boost incomes of small local farms and increase consumers' access to fresh produce
- community gardens - that help low-income consumers supplement their diets with home-grown produce
- community supported agriculture (CSA) farms - that can help provide small farms with economic stability and consumers with high quality produce, often at below retail prices
- farm-to-school initiatives - that help local farmers sell fresh fruits and vegetables directly to school meals programs. [1]

Over the long term, the hope is that community food security programs will both “strengthen local capacity for food production, processing and marketing; and boost the effectiveness of federal food assistance and education programs by increasing the availability of high quality affordable food within a community.” [1]

Community food programs, says USDA, can also “support rural communities by strengthening traditional ties between farmers and urban consumers.” [2]

Thinking Globally, Buying Locally

In the ten years since the community foods program began, a diverse array of groups concerned with food, farm and nutrition issues has come together to form the community foods movement.

Anti-hunger and anti-poverty advocates form the core of this movement, which has as its fundamental concern the ability of low-income people to obtain adequate amounts of nutritious food. They have been joined by people promoting sustainable agriculture, who were already involved in building local markets and increasing opportunities for family farms.

The sustainable agriculture activists have added their perspective to the movement and identified several problems they believe indicate an ailing food system, including

- The loss of family farms since World War II and the lack of opportunities for small- and medium-sized family farms that remain
- The globalization of food - increasing imports of food produced without the safety or labor standards in effect in the U.S.
- The concentration of food industries, with a few giant companies dominating and eliminating competition
- Communities, both rural and urban, losing the ability to feed themselves. [3]

Public health advocates have also joined the discussion, bringing up issues that impact most Americans, regardless of income level, such as

- Alarming rates of obesity and diet related diseases
- Public ignorance about proper diet, nutrition and agriculture.

Environmentalists concerned with energy conservation and global warming add to the mix such issues as

- The 1,500 miles the average food item travels from “gate to plate”
- The industrial-style production of meat in CAFOs (confined animal feeding operations), which can pollute the environment.

Childhood Poverty in Oklahoma

In Oklahoma, 21.1% of children live in poverty.

In 45 of Oklahoma's 77 counties the rate meets or exceeds that average.

Rates rise above 30% in five rural counties: Pushmataha, McCurtain, Seminole, Choctaw and Harmon. [10]

Advocates propose that many of these problems can be solved with community food systems. They claim far-reaching benefits, such as better nutrition and health for everybody (including those with low incomes), more opportunities for family farms, and more jobs and a better economy. They point out the environmental benefits of smaller-scale farms that use sustainable or organic production techniques. Others say that more food self-reliance makes communities and individuals more secure in this age of terrorism and dwindling/threatened oil supplies.

Closer to Home

This report is a picture of Oklahoma's food system, seen through the lens of community food security. It is an attempt to answer the question posed at the beginning of this piece: Is Oklahoma food secure?

Two years in the making, this groundbreaking report features extensive research and original analysis. It is the first attempt to look at Oklahoma's food system from field to table, the first time that information about agriculture and agricultural markets have been combined with information on nutrition, health and food access into one report.

Closer to Home has a reader-friendly format. The report features about two dozen magazine-style articles about innovative people, businesses and programs contributing positively to community food security in Oklahoma. The profiles run the gamut from a successful community garden at a small country school in Delaware County, to Oklahoma's own regional dairy, Braum's.

Alongside the profiles, we examine the community

A New Way to Look at the Food System

Looking at food and agriculture issue through the lens of community food security requires one to look at the whole food system and understand how each part affects the whole food security of a given community.

Community food security programs and policies address a broad range of issues, including, but not limited to:

- Participation in and access to federal food assistance programs
- Economic opportunity and job security
- Community development and social cohesion
- Ecologically sustainable agricultural production
- Farmland preservation
- Economic viability of rural communities
- Direct food marketing
- Diet-related health problems
- Access to emergency food. [9]

At first glance, some of these topics don't seem to be related. For instance, what does farmland preservation have to do with diet related health problems? Or direct marketing?

But digging a bit deeper, one can see the connections. In Oklahoma, high rates of obesity and diet-related health problems are due in part to diets with too many high fat, high sugar foods and not enough fresh fruits and vegetables.

Many argue that the best tasting, and therefore most likely to be eaten, fruits and vegetables are those grown nearby - picked ripe, handled properly and served as quickly as possible. When this is done, the nutritional value is high.

In order to have highly palatable, fresh fruits and vegetables close at hand, one must have a viable local agriculture and viable local markets such as farmers' markets where farmers make direct sales to consumers.

In order to have a viable local agriculture, local farm land must be preserved. Much of the best farmland in the nation surrounds cities, where it at most risk of being lost, converted into subdivisions or industrial parks (this is also true in Oklahoma). Hence, there is a need for farmland preservation programs.

Looking at food and agriculture through the lens of community food security allows one to see the connections between seemingly unrelated issues.

food security issues raised by the articles. For example, alongside a profile of the Oklahoma Farm-to-School program, we explore the diet-related health problems of Oklahoma's kids. Along with a profile of Ricky and Claudia Crow's farm near Shawnee, we investigate the economic potential of farmers selling direct to consumers.

In the first five chapters of *Closer to Home*, we take an in-depth look at food insecurity in the state, as well as the diet-related health problems of Oklahomans and efforts to find solutions to these problems.

Despite strong ongoing efforts by state and federal agencies and concerned citizens, Oklahoma has rates of household food insecurity higher than the national average, and in recent years, the highest rate of hunger in the nation. Thirty-two counties in Oklahoma have been classified as "food deserts," meaning residents have poor access to supermarkets and consequently to a variety of foods.

Closely correlated with a high rate of food insecurity is a high rate of poverty. Again, Oklahoma's numbers are higher than the national average. In 2003, Oklahoma's poverty rate was 14.6%, compared to the national rate of 12.5%.

Oklahoma is also struggling with an obesity epidemic, a crisis that is costing its citizens dearly, both in life and wealth. Because of obesity-related diseases, thousands of Oklahomans die prematurely each year (and Oklahoma is the only state whose age-adjusted death rates have been getting worse). Oklahomans who are overweight or obese account for \$864 million per year in direct medical expenditures. [4]

In the next nine chapters, we explore the possible social and economic benefits of more self-reliant, locally-based, community food systems.

While some important programs (such as the Made in Oklahoma label) are in place to promote Oklahoma-grown food products, much potential has yet to be realized. Oklahomans spend \$8 billion on food each year, yet much of that amount flows out of the state. Why? As the number of Oklahoma farms has declined by one-half since 1940, so too has the diversity of the crops produced on the farms that

remain. The result: much of the food eaten here is grown and processed elsewhere.

So while Oklahoma agriculture makes money on large crops of a few commodities such as cattle and wheat, it forgoes potential income by failing to meet its own consumer demands for many other food items. That argument runs like this: if Oklahomans started spending ten percent of their \$8 billion annual food budget on Oklahoma-grown foods, that would be an \$800 million boost to the state's agricultural income.

But the economic power of local food goes far beyond simple addition and subtraction. Every additional dollar spent on Oklahoma food multiplies its own value many times over in the local economy, circulating through the community and creating wealth. According to a study in Iowa, every dollar spent at a farmers market generated \$1.58 in additional sales, and every dollar earned by vendors translated into \$1.47 in other income.

Rural communities in Oklahoma are in need of such income. Rural rates of poverty (16.3%) are much higher than urban rates (13.7%). Fifteen counties in Oklahoma have been labeled “persistent poverty” counties, where poverty is long-standing and results “from a complex of social and economic factors...” [5]

In general, per capita income is quite a bit (25%) lower in rural Oklahoma counties than in urban counties. In addition, Oklahoma State University researchers have reported a “widening gap between retail sales in metro areas and retail sales in non-metro (rural) areas” which has a “tremendous implication for rural communities.”

Declining sales tax revenues from retail sales (often groceries) can lead to a loss of services, which can in turn cause residents “to move toward the metropolitan areas” resulting in a “a vicious cycle for these troubled towns.” [6]

These statistics make the question of how to build Oklahoma's rural communities crucial to the future well-being of Oklahoma. In “community listening sessions” conducted by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service in 2002 in every county in the

Sustainable Community Food Systems: The Main Idea

- Food is produced, processed and distributed as locally as possible
- Supports a food system that
 - Preserves farmland
 - Fosters community economic vitality
 - Requires less energy for transportation
 - Offers consumers the freshest food [8]

state, Oklahomans were asked to identify the crucial issues that needed to be addressed in their communities.

Citizens in 38% of Oklahoma counties expressed a desire for more agriculture-based development, such as the development of value-added agricultural products. Examples of value-added products are cuts of beef, cheese, breads, juices - agricultural crops which have been processed to varying degrees to become the foods people eat. [7]

This report takes a closer look at twelve counties in Oklahoma in the series of “county snapshots” that are paired with profiles throughout. For example, alongside an article about the Muskogee Farmers' Market is a “snapshot” of Muskogee County. Together on one page are key indicators of the physical and economic health of county residents, information on crops and farm profitability, and indicators of the potential for greater community food security, such as interest in farm-to-school programs and dollars spent on food.

The county snapshots could easily serve as a starting point for groups who want to conduct a more in-depth assessment of their community's food security.

Indeed, *Closer to Home* is meant to be an ice-breaker, a conversation starter, a catalyst for further study and action to improve Oklahoma's food system so that it serves everyone well.

In each chapter, we propose policies and actions that could bring greater food security, in all its flavors, to Oklahoma in the 21st century.

How to Read This Report's "County Snapshots"

Scattered throughout this report, you'll come across "snapshots" of Oklahoma counties that relate in some way to the topic being discussed - the county that's home to the farm in a profile, for example, or a county that's classified as a food desert in the section on food deserts.

These "snapshots" are collections of statistics, or indicators, that, taken together, help to give an idea of what the current status and future prospects of community food security are for those counties.

While this report looks at Oklahoma overall, these county-level indicators could serve as a jumping-off point for more detailed analyses of community food security at a more local level. [1]

Here, we present a "snapshot" of the state of Oklahoma, using the same indicators contained in the individual county snapshots, as a guide to using this information.

(In the county snapshots, some indicators are followed by other numbers, italicized and in brackets. These are state averages for the same indicator, to show how individual counties compare to what's happening statewide. In this state snapshot, the italicized and bracketed values are nationwide averages.)

Population - total, and % change: How many people need to be fed? How many people are buying food? Is that number rising, and putting development pressure on farmland, or falling as rural areas empty out? [2]

Number of farms - total, and % change: How many farms are there, and is the number increasing or dropping? [3]

To give depth to that information, the numbers of farms that are making and losing money, and the average amount that farms in each of those situations are taking in or losing, is also reported.

The number of farms receiving government subsidies, and the average subsidy amount, is also shown. This is meant to counter the perception that farm support programs necessarily benefit all farms, or

small family farms, and to stimulate thought about what subsidy programs are accomplishing, or could accomplish.

Per capita personal income, and % change: These are measures of the economic health of the county. [2]

Average farm net income, and % change: These offer a similar gauge of the farm economy specifically, and, when compared to per capita personal income, give a sense of whether farming is a relatively more or less financially rewarding occupation than others in the area. [3]

Poverty rate [4], unemployment rate [2], and percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunches [5]: These are all measures of household economic well-being; the lower these numbers are, the less food-secure are the people they represent.

Percentage of population that is underweight/normal, overweight, and obese: These indicators spell out how severe the obesity crisis is on a local level. They can be considered together with the foregoing economic indicators to shed some light on the relationship between poverty on the one hand and poor nutrition and health on the other. [6]

Amount spent on food: This carries an idea of how much buying power a community exercises in its current food purchases - which is also a measure of how much economic support could potentially exist for sales of locally grown food. [7]

Value of direct sales [3], number of farmers' markets [8], and number of schools interested in farm-to-school programs [9]: If the previous indicator shows the heights that local food systems could reach, this one shows how far they have to climb, tallying the dollar value of food sales transacted by farmers face to face with their customers, the number of nearby farmers' markets where such transactions can take place, and the number of schools willing to work toward feeding their students more food grown by local farms.

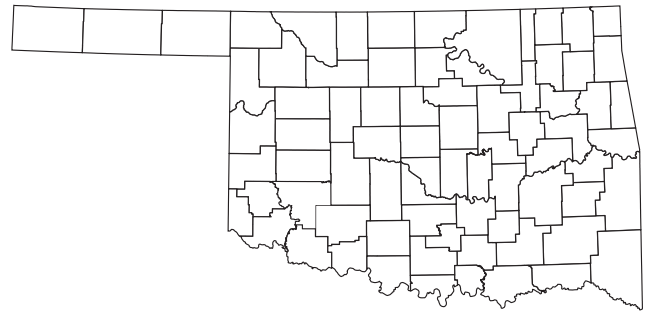
Major crops: Lists the top three crops in value of sales

Community Food Security: Snapshot

14 METRO COUNTIES
32 FOOD DESERT COUNTIES

Oklahoma

3,511,532 people in 2003 +2% since 2000 [*+3 %*]
 83,300 farms in 2002 -1% since 1997 [*-4 %*]:
 36,375 with net gains, averaging \$31,559
 46,907 with net losses, averaging \$ 9,878
 24,316 with federal subsidies, averaging \$6,166



Per capita personal income, 2003: \$25,936 [*\$31,472*]
 Average farm net income, 2002: \$ 8,220 [*\$19,032*]

Poverty: 14.5 % [*12.1%*] Unemployment: 5.66% [*5.80%*]
 Students receiving free and reduced price lunches: 54.1% [*59.0%*]

[Bracketed figures in italics are national averages for comparison.]

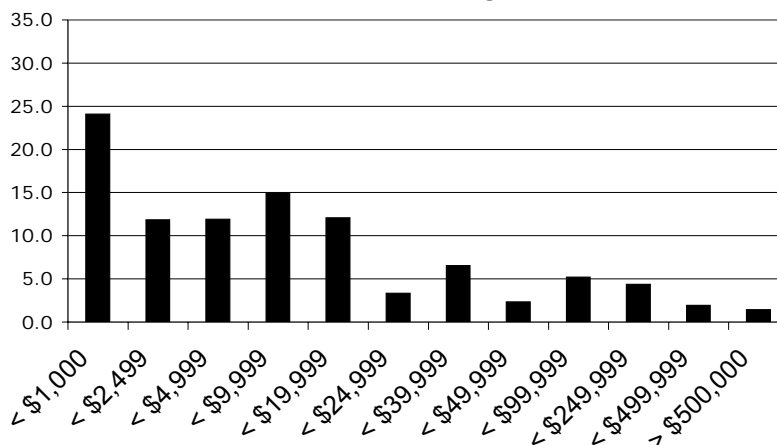
Percentage of state population that is
 Underweight/normal: 39.9 [*40.6*] Overweight: 36.0 [*36.6*] Obese: 24.1 [*22.8*]

Amount spent in 2004 on
 groceries \$4,470.0 million
 meals at restaurants \$4,076.5 million

Value of direct sales, 2002 \$3.7 million
 Farmers' markets in state 35
 Number of school districts interested in farm-to-school 174

Major crops: cattle, poultry, hogs
 Fruit/vegetable crops (on # of farms): pecans(2,879), watermelons(311),
 peaches(277), tomatoes(271), apples(239), grapes(234), and many others

Percent of farms with gross sales...



receipts, as an indicator of the dominant kinds of farming in the area. These are almost always low-margin commodity crops, the bulk of which are shipped out of Oklahoma for value-added processing elsewhere. [3]

Fruit/vegetable crops: In contrast to the previous indicator, this one lists the number of farms growing relatively higher-value crops, many of which are ideally suited to production for local use. It can be read as a measure of the existing potential for community food security on the agricultural side: what kinds of crops work in a given area, and how many farms are currently raising them? [3]

Percentage of farms in different gross sales brackets: This indicator can help to upend contending myths about farm economics: both that farming is a dead-end occupation, and that all farmers are rich.

In the state as a whole, for example, nearly a quarter of all farms gross less than \$1,000 a year, and half gross less than \$10,000. Such figures can help flesh out the net farm income indicator given earlier; a high average net farm income can sometimes result from a relatively small number of farms with extremely high returns, surrounded by neighbors with low or negative net incomes. [3]

Metro/nonmetro: These categories correspond roughly to “urban” and “rural” respectively. They are taken from a USDA classification system based on counties' populations and proximity to large cities. [10]

Food desert/non food desert: Counties are classified as food deserts when more than a quarter of their residents live more than 10 miles from the nearest supermarket or supercenter, and as “severe” food deserts when all of their residents do. [11]