



State of the **Food System** Report

2022



OFFICE OF
SUSTAINABILITY

CITY OF AUSTIN



Executive Summary

*A message from Edwin Marty,
City of Austin Food Policy Manager*



Food in Austin holds so much meaning. Many of us are able to savor and celebrate our identities through the food we eat and share, thanks in part to such a robust and innovative food system. Still, across our community, there are many questions about the food we grow, sell, buy, and eat. While Austin is home to a vibrant food scene with legendary breakfast tacos, farm-to-table restaurants, and world-class grocery stores, affordability and access for all remains a challenge.

In particular, the last two years have brought new difficulties, as we've seen the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Winter Storm Uri, international conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, and other climate-related disasters. These extreme events have shed important light on the gaps in our food system, from straining our food supply chain to significantly increasing our community's **food insecurity**.

We hope to learn from these challenges as we embark on an ambitious food planning effort — the first comprehensive plan of its kind locally. Throughout this project, we want to dig in on big questions and hear directly from Austinites. What can we celebrate about the food system in Austin, and what do we need to change? How can we improve the quality of life for Austinites now and in the future?

This State of the Food System report serves as a baseline assessment of our current local food system — generally considered the first step in a food system planning process. It is not a comprehensive overview, but rather an introduction for all who will be involved in the creation of the Austin Food Plan and the work towards a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system. Throughout this report, you'll be introduced to key food system sectors, data, trends, challenges, recent policy changes, and indicators.

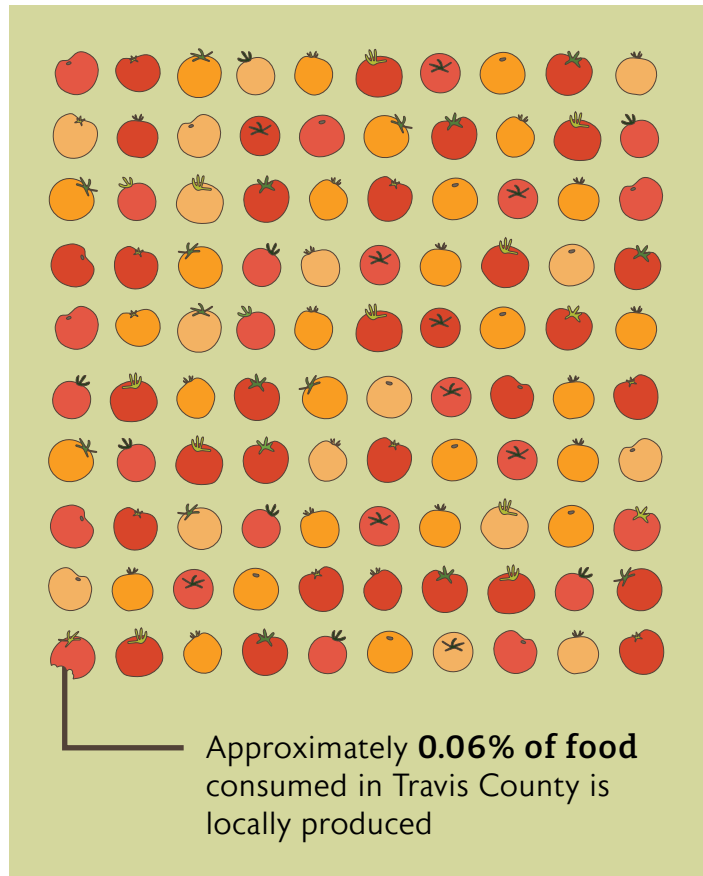
Through this effort, our vision is to ensure the **right to food** for all. Together, we can imagine and build a food system that meets the needs of everyone in our community.

Quick Facts & Purpose

This report aims to provide a starting point for understanding Austin’s current food system through relevant data points, historical context, and recent policy decisions. Throughout the document, key questions are intended to spark discussion and new ideas for how we can address specific issues.

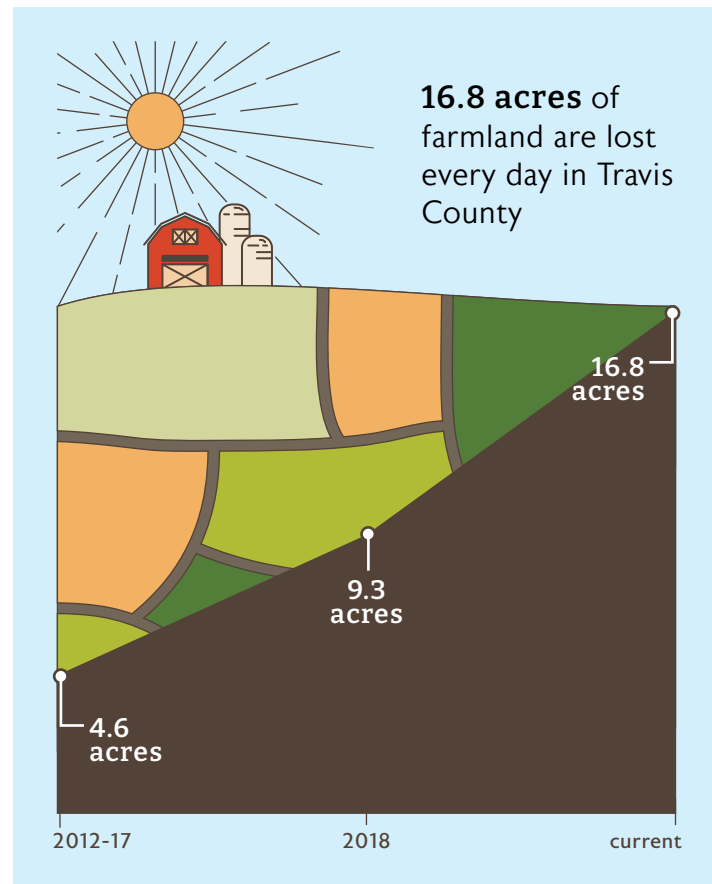
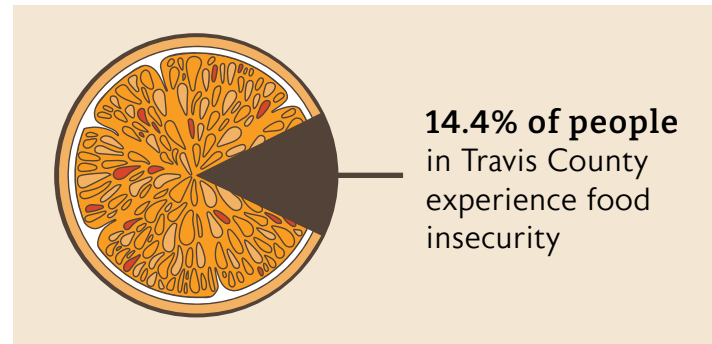
While this report may not include every variable related to Austin’s Food System, it helps provide a foundation and source of inspiration for the co-creation of Austin’s first-ever comprehensive **Food Plan**.

Note: All data used in this report is documented in [Appendix I](#).



1.24 million pounds of food is wasted every day in Austin

Food is responsible for **21% of all greenhouse gas emissions** created by everyone in our community



A note on links: Words appearing in **brown, bold font** link to the corresponding page in the Glossary. External links throughout the report are [red and underlined](#).

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What is a Food System?

The City of Austin defines the **food system** as the interconnected network of everything that happens with food — where and how it is grown, distributed, sold, consumed, wasted, or recovered. Globally, the food system is shaped by its stakeholders, practices, and the laws that regulate both. We consider our local food system to include the **Central Texas** region.

This report divides the food system into six sections, providing a framework for exploring where Austin's food comes from and its impact.



Key Areas of the Food System



Food Justice
How systemic racism and colonization impact how the food system works — or doesn't work — for each member of our community.

Food Production
Where our food comes from, including everything from farming to ranching to backyard gardening.



Food Processing & Distribution
What happens to food from where it is grown to when it reaches your plate, including how food is moved and processed.



Food Markets & Retail
How food is sold and purchased.



Food Consumption & Access
How we eat our food, who struggles to get enough food, and what impact our consumption has on our health.



Post-Consumption & Food Waste
What happens to the parts of food we don't eat and the impact of food waste on the environment



Pasture-raised chickens at Community First! Village's Genesis Gardens.



Why Do Food Systems Matter?

For Austin to be a thriving, healthy, and just community, it must have an equitable, sustainable, and resilient local food system. Growing, selling, eating, and recovering food locally sustains employment and creates new jobs, strengthens the economy, improves public health, and reduces transportation impacts. As articulated in [Strategic Direction 2023](#), the City of Austin's vision is a food system that benefits and meets the needs of everyone.

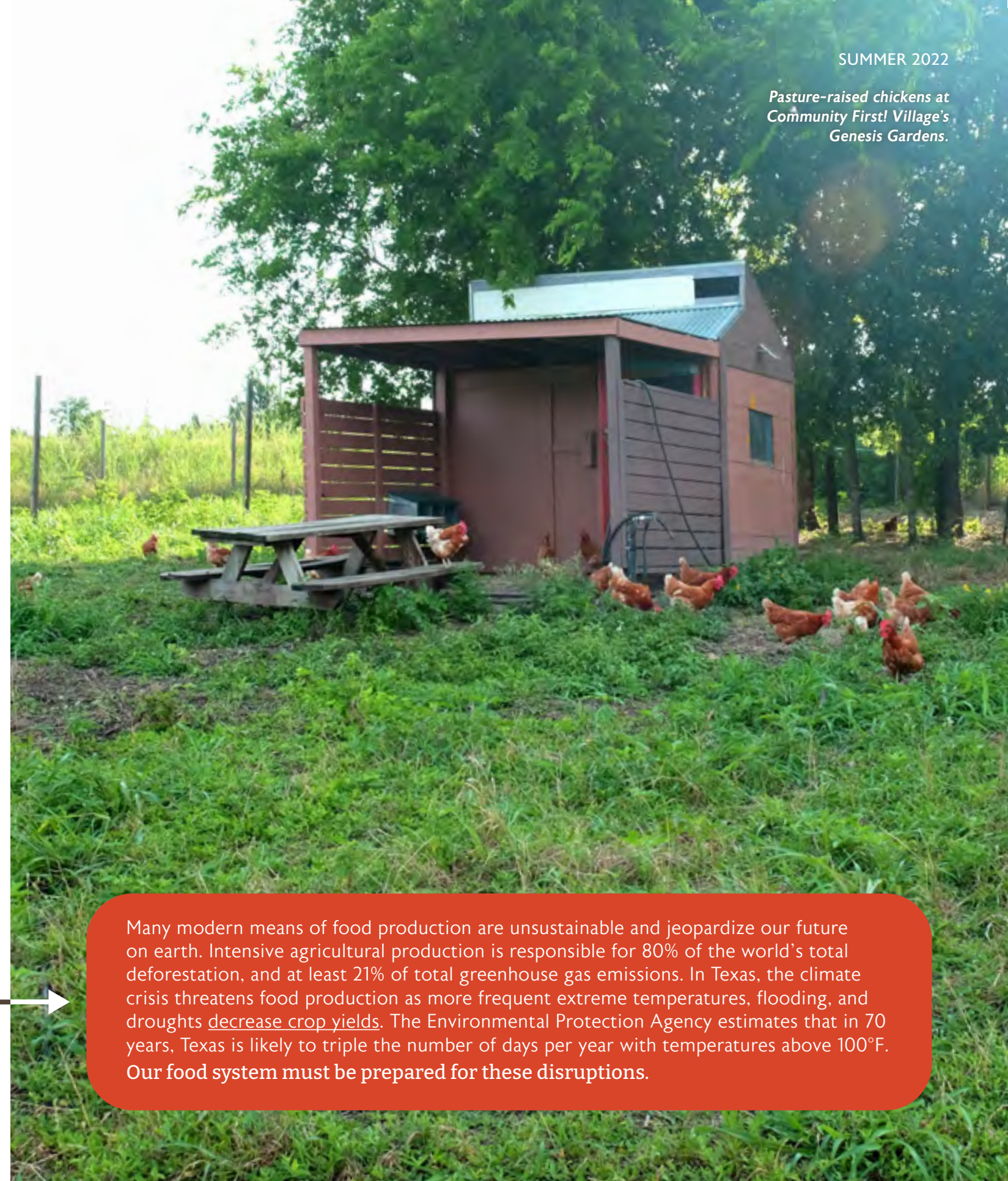
Yet, more than an economic resource or a bodily requirement, food is also medicine, joy, culture, memory, and place. Varying across cultures and countries, food has been at the center of traditional and spiritual gatherings, holidays, and mourning practices for centuries. The food we eat reflects who we are and where we come from.

When we think about what makes Austin unique, often the first things that come to mind are related to food — barbeque, breakfast tacos, food trucks, and other special food offerings. Food connects us not only to places but to each other.

At its best, the food system can provide:

-  healthy, affordable, culturally relevant, and sustainable food for all
-  meaningful and fair employment opportunities
-  humane treatment of animals
-  support for our natural systems

The existing food system does not live up to these aspirations, but we'd like to believe that it could.



"Sometimes I have to choose between getting medicine or food because of the price."

DISTRICT 5 RESIDENT
2018 Food Environmental Analysis

Many modern means of food production are unsustainable and jeopardize our future on earth. Intensive agricultural production is responsible for 80% of the world's total deforestation, and at least 21% of total greenhouse gas emissions. In Texas, the climate crisis threatens food production as more frequent extreme temperatures, flooding, and droughts decrease crop yields. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that in 70 years, Texas is likely to triple the number of days per year with temperatures above 100°F. **Our food system must be prepared for these disruptions.**

History of Austin's Food System

The food system in Austin predates the colonization and genocide of Central Texas' original stewards. What is now Texas resides on the stolen traditional and ancestral homelands of the Tonkawa, the Apache, the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, the Lipan Apache Tribe, the Texas Band of Yaqui Indians, the Coahuiltecan, and all other tribes not explicitly stated that share a history with this land. Other tribes that have been or have become part of lands and territories in Texas include the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, Kickapoo Tribe of Texas, Carrizo & Comecrudo, Tigua Pueblo, Caddo, Comanche, Kiowa, Wichita, Chickasaw, and Waco nations.

Since colonization, the foundation of our current food system in Austin has been shaped by white supremacist and oppressive policies and programs, which undermine the health and sovereignty of its original inhabitants while erasing their culture, traditions, values, and language. Understanding this history is critical to recognizing its lasting impact on our current food system. While there is much to be addressed, City staff are committed to actively working towards **food justice**.

Despite past and ongoing challenges, Austin is home to a vibrant food community with a thriving **food retail** scene, neighborhoods with unique food offerings, a growing urban agriculture community, and tireless food access and food justice movements. The timeline that follows includes a non-comprehensive account of significant activities that have impacted Austin's food system.

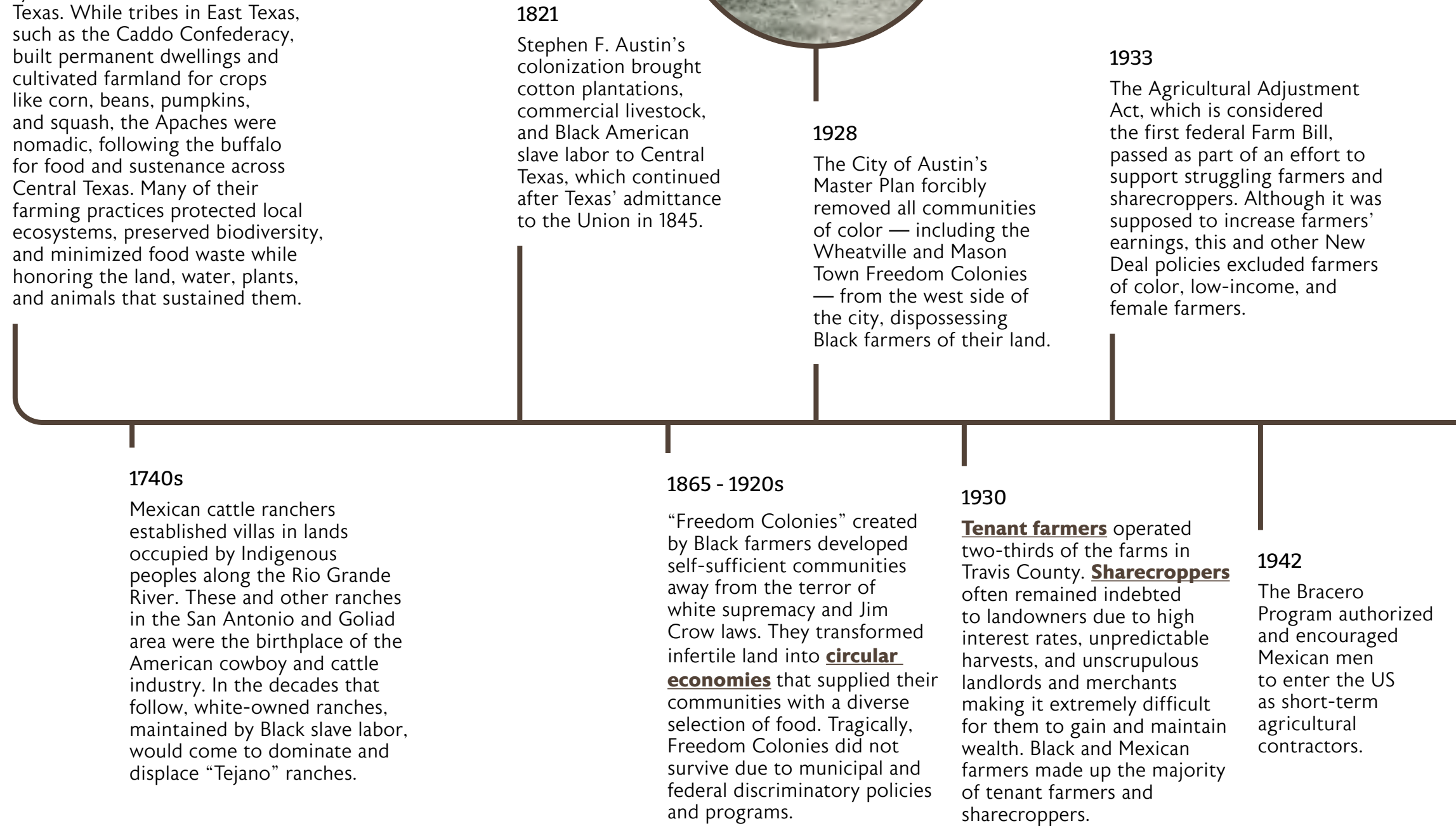
Pre-Colonization

Long before the arrival of Europeans or the establishment of Mexico or the United States, Indigenous peoples hunted, gathered, farmed, and maintained diverse and sustainable food systems across what is now called Texas. While tribes in East Texas, such as the Caddo Confederacy, built permanent dwellings and cultivated farmland for crops like corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash, the Apaches were nomadic, following the buffalo for food and sustenance across Central Texas. Many of their farming practices protected local ecosystems, preserved biodiversity, and minimized food waste while honoring the land, water, plants, and animals that sustained them.



An African American woman stands in front of a house in the Wheatville subdivision prior to the passage of the 1928 Master Plan.

[PICA-36047]. Austin History Center, Austin Public Library



H. S. (Hank) Brown (second from left), president of the Texas AFL-CIO, joins the June 1966 farmworkers' march in San Antonio.

[E-0012-187-C-02], San Antonio Express-News Photograph Collection, UTSA Special Collections.



1956

Construction of Interstate Highway 35 further cemented physical segregation of Black and Hispanic/Latinx residents living in East Austin.

1966

The farmworkers' march from the Rio Grande Valley to the State Capitol in Austin led to the first statewide minimum wage, effectively launching the farmworkers' movement and, to an extent, the Chicano movement in Texas. Farmworkers still fight against oppressive conditions, including low wages, dangerous working conditions, and inadequate housing.

2000

The City of Austin's first [Urban Farm Ordinance](#) aimed to increase local food production, create jobs, and provide direct neighborhood connections to the food system by legalizing urban agriculture in all zoning areas.

2014

Austin City Council created a Food Policy Manager position in the Office of Sustainability to provide coordination between City departments and community stakeholders around food policies and initiatives.



An Austin street covered in snow during 2021's Winter Storm Uri.

February 2021

Winter Storm Uri wreaked havoc in Texas, plunging millions into freezing darkness with widespread power outages. Austin's food and water supply was affected, and food banks struggled to meet increased demand.

1954

Xenophobia towards Mexican agricultural workers culminated in the largest mass deportation in US history. As many as 1.3 million people were forced to leave.

1965

Immigrant farmworkers that remained or returned to the US mobilized to advocate for better working conditions, establishing national agricultural unions.

1975

Austin Community Gardens was founded as a project of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The group became an independent nonprofit in 1987 and eventually merged with the Sustainable Food Center in 2001.

2008

The [Austin-Travis County Food Policy Board](#) was established to advise both Austin City Council and the Travis County Commissioners Court about ways to improve the local food system.

2020

The COVID-19 pandemic began, causing massive disruption to daily life, public health, and the food system.

September 2021

City Council adopted the [Austin Climate Equity Plan](#), co-created with community leaders. The plan established several goals related to a sustainable food system.

A Year of Dual Crises: COVID-19 and Winter Storm Uri

The Impact of COVID-19

On March 13, 2020, two days after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, Travis County confirmed its first known local cases of the disease. The pandemic caused massive disruption to daily life and had a heavy impact on food systems both locally and globally.

In the harsh reality of the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic, members of our community struggled to keep themselves fed. In March and April of 2020, there was a 51.7% increase in overall call volume to **2-1-1**, and a 160.5% increase in calls related to food needs, compared to data from March and April 2019. In Travis County, food insecurity increased from 12.8% in 2019 to 17% in 2020 and **remained elevated** at 14.4% in 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic also brought huge challenges to the food retail sector. “Essential” food workers across the industry experienced many challenges during the pandemic. Many **food businesses** operate on tight margins, and local Stay at Home Orders and worker shortages resulted in a wave of restaurant closures — many of them fixtures in the Austin community that had been in business for years. In Texas, about 9,000 restaurants or food businesses have closed their doors since the pandemic began. The impact continues to be felt. In 2021, 72% of Texas restaurant operators say they are short-staffed.

The Added Crisis of Winter Storm Uri

In February 2021, less than a year after the first COVID-19 cases were reported in Austin, Winter Storm Uri wreaked havoc in Texas. The storm caused statewide power outages, resulting in millions of Texans losing electricity for several days. In Austin, outages affected the water supply, causing a loss of water pressure, frozen and burst pipes, and the need to boil water citywide. Thousands of homes and apartments were without water for days and, in some cases, weeks.

Winter Storm Uri brought a range of challenges to food access locally:

- > Ice and snowy conditions made **food distribution** difficult
- > Limited supply and loss of power closed grocery stores or left shelves empty
- > Food banks struggled with the loss of power and water amid record demand
- > Regional farmers lost significant revenue from destroyed crops
- > Food access disaster planning and procedures were unable to meet the need

For those with the means to travel, lines for operating grocery stores wrapped around blocks. Winter storm Uri further contributed to a spike in hunger as the Central Texas Food Bank struggled to meet demand in its second-largest mass distribution in history.

Partnering to Support Those Most in Need

Through both COVID-19 and Winter Storm Uri, government and community organizations banded together to help feed people in our community most impacted, such as food workers, people experiencing homelessness, low-income communities, and communities of color.

- > During COVID-19, the Office of Sustainability worked with local restaurants Easy Tiger, Henbit-Emmer and Rye, and [Good Work Austin](#) to produce over one million caregiver meals for families while supporting employment for restaurant staff.
- > The City of Austin awarded \$23 million in Business Relief Grants to 1,052 businesses. 41% of the awardees were food businesses.
- > To increase food access during COVID-19, the City of Austin allocated \$9.6 million with Travis County contributing an additional \$1.7 million.
- > Following the winter storm, over \$383,000 was raised among local organizations to help impacted farmers. More than 55 farmers were awarded funding.
- > From April 2020-September 2021, the [Eating Apart Together](#) initiative provided over 1 million meals to people experiencing homelessness.

An Impetus for Change

We know these events do not stand alone. Rather, they shed important light on the fragility of our food system. In June 2021, with COVID-19 and Winter Storm Uri in mind, Austin City Council [called for the creation of the City's first-ever Austin Food Plan](#) and first-ever Disaster Food and Drinking Water Access Plan.



A community partner loads meals to distribute to people experiencing homelessness.



Why Food Planning?

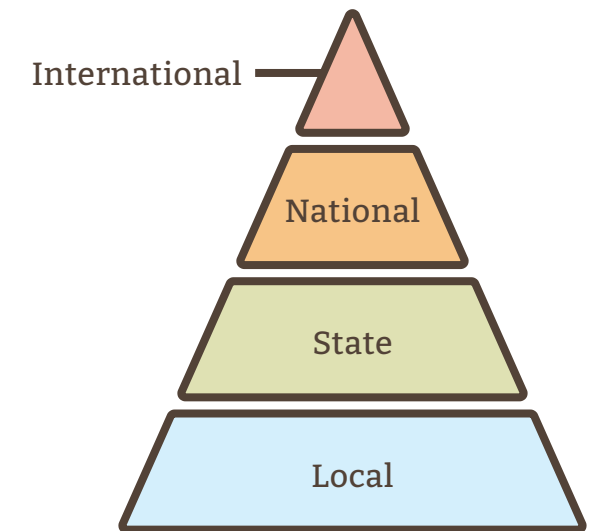
Food system policy is the study of the laws and regulations that govern the food we grow, forage, raise, process, distribute, buy, sell, cook, eat, and waste. Nearly every aspect of the food system is shaped by some form of regulation, each adopted and enforced at different levels of government.

Food policy is controlled by a legislative patchwork across various governmental agencies, leading to siloes and inconsistencies. The United States Department of Agriculture maintains the colossal role of regulating our food, but since the early 2000s, municipal governments have increasingly gained agency within the food system by hiring dedicated food policy staff. Food policy work spans sustainability, economic development, public health, equity, and other areas, leaving staff with the need to create more robust and coordinated practices. Comprehensive **food system plans** are a step in this direction.

Creating a Food Plan

A food system plan defines a vision and outlines interconnected, forward-thinking activities designed to strengthen a community's food system. The planning process provides an opportunity for cities to co-create a vision and actionable goals for the local food system alongside community members, farmers and farmworkers, food retail and service workers, students, small business owners, and other partners.

Shaping Food System Policy at Every Level



A Note on Governance

Although the City of Austin and other public institutions have the authority to govern over local matters, state law can be used to preempt local ordinances, and federal law can be used to preempt state or local law.

Food Production

Where our food comes from, including everything from farming to ranching to backyard gardening.

Travis County is home to more than 1,000 **farms**, which are all privately owned and operated. These farms provide several types of food, including corn, sorghum, wheat, and various fruits and vegetables. Austin is also home to 53 **community gardens**, 218 school gardens, three **food forests**, and countless home gardens, which provide food to a lesser degree in our area. The City of Austin has jurisdiction over approving and managing certain **urban agriculture activities** at the local level, including community gardens and **urban farms** within the city limits.

While the Austin area has a robust and growing demand for local food, only about 0.06% of food consumed in Travis County is produced locally. The vast majority of food consumed in Austin is produced in other areas and transported, resulting in a higher carbon footprint and food that is less fresh. This also means our food supply is subject to disruptions in the supply chain beyond Austin.

The [US Farm Bill](#) sets the policy agenda and budget for food production nationally. All Texas agricultural practices must comply with these standards. State law covers agricultural finance, food safety, farm inputs, product standards, and more.

Trends and Challenges

- Urban farms and community gardens are allowed everywhere in Austin with a permit, but barriers prevent low-income communities and communities of color from participating. For example, permitting paperwork for community gardens is currently available only in English.
- Farm and land ownership is held nearly exclusively by white men.
- Using land for urban farms creates tension between policymakers and community members due to the rising cost and lack of availability of land.
- Fueled by unsustainable agricultural practices, the climate crisis threatens food production and crop yields in the region.
- Federal food policies incentivize the production of highly processed, low-nutrient foods instead of nutrient-dense, whole foods like fruits and vegetables.
- Immigrant farmworkers are often paid low wages, work in dangerous conditions, and lack access to safe and adequate housing.

Policy Actions

Since 2015, the Austin-Travis County Food Policy Board has made [several recommendations](#) related to land use and local food production, including an approved [proposal](#) in 2016 to incorporate community garden support into City staff job descriptions within the Parks and Recreation Department.

In 2021, the Austin Climate Equity Plan established several goals related to sustainable food production, including protecting 500,000 acres of farmland from development in the five-county region and incorporating all City-owned land in a management plan that results in neutral or negative emissions.

Key Questions

- How might more of the food consumed in Austin be grown or produced locally?
- How could the City connect farmers and farmworkers with policymakers and involve them in planning processes?
- Given land use competition, development pressures, and jurisdictional issues, how can we preserve land for farming and urban agriculture initiatives?
- What is the city and county government's role in supporting local food production?
- How might local food producers improve **resilience** in the face of climate disasters?
- How could we measure the environmental impact of the regional food system?

Facts

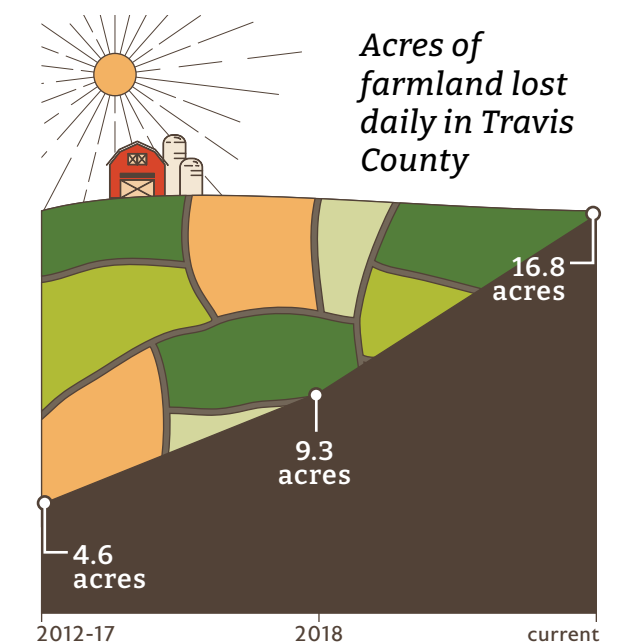
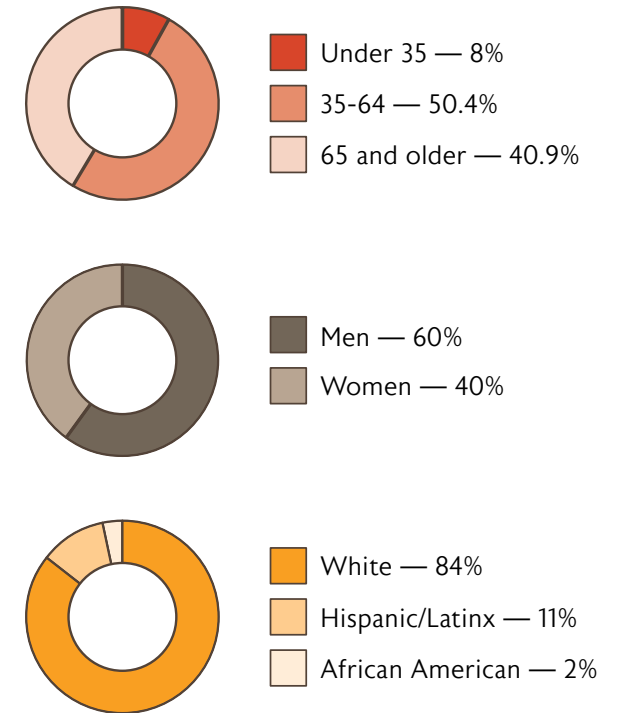
Approximately **0.06%** of food consumed in Travis County is produced locally.

Central Texas is home to **8,498** farms. Of these:

- **9** are urban farms
- **21** are certified Organic
- **13** claim regenerative practices
- **0** are Fair-Labor Certified

There are **13,647** people employed in farm labor in Central Texas.

Farm Labor Demographics for Travis County



Food Processing & Distribution

What happens to food from where it is grown to when it reaches your plate, including how food is moved and processed.

The ability to preserve and extend the freshness of food helps ensure its availability year-round. Activities involved in **food processing** make raw agricultural products edible through cooking, freezing, combining ingredients, canning, and more. To operate, food processors must **obtain a permit** from the City of Austin and follow all state and federal regulations that govern food safety, manufacturing, and labeling. Some “**cottage food**” products, produced in small quantities and sold out of home kitchens, are exempt from many regulations that apply to larger-scale processors.

Distribution is a critical part of the supply chain and a significant factor in Austin’s local food economy. Once processed, food distribution connects food from its production location to where it gets prepared or sold. More demand for local food has required the need for smaller-scale distribution networks, which creates economic opportunities for small and mid-sized producers to connect to wholesale markets, improving food system resilience.

Trends and Challenges

- While important for protecting public health, the permitting process can be quite time-intensive and confusing, which can include bureaucratic barriers for small to mid-size producers to launch an operation.
- Small and mid-size distributors are subject to the same federal and state regulations for food packing, transportation, and storage as those required of industrial giants, making it difficult for local businesses to operate and compete.
- Food buyers need products at high volume, consistency, and low cost, which is a challenge for local smaller-scale producers.
- There are no **food hubs** in Austin. However, Common Market operates out of Houston and serves some of Central Texas, and Austin has two local **food aggregators** — Farmhouse Delivery and Farm to Table.

Policy Actions

A [2019 report](#) by the nonprofit Sustainable Food Center examined the feasibility of supporting a local food hub. The report’s recommendations aimed at meeting the needs of local producers, such as providing business and financial management consultation, facilitating land access, strengthening the farm labor force, and more.

In 2021, several City departments developed a package of recommendations called [Nourish Austin](#) in response to a [City Council Resolution](#). The proposal included the development of publicly-owned food hubs, but the recommendation is not funded at this time.

Key Questions

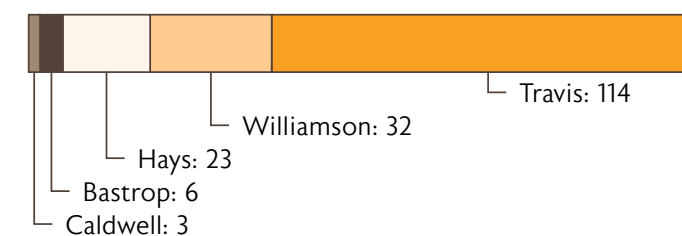
- How might we establish food hubs to support networks of local food packaging and distribution?
- How can government organizations and private food retailers support more local food in **consumer packaged goods**?
- How can we support better conditions for workers in food processing and distribution?
- How can we strengthen economic development, workforce development, and worker ownership in the food processing sector?
- How might we ensure animal welfare in our food production process?

Facts

Central Texas is home to:

- 4 Milk Manufacturing Facilities
- 12 Animal Slaughtering & Processing Facilities
- 178 Food Manufacturing Facilities

Number of Food Manufacturing Facilities by County

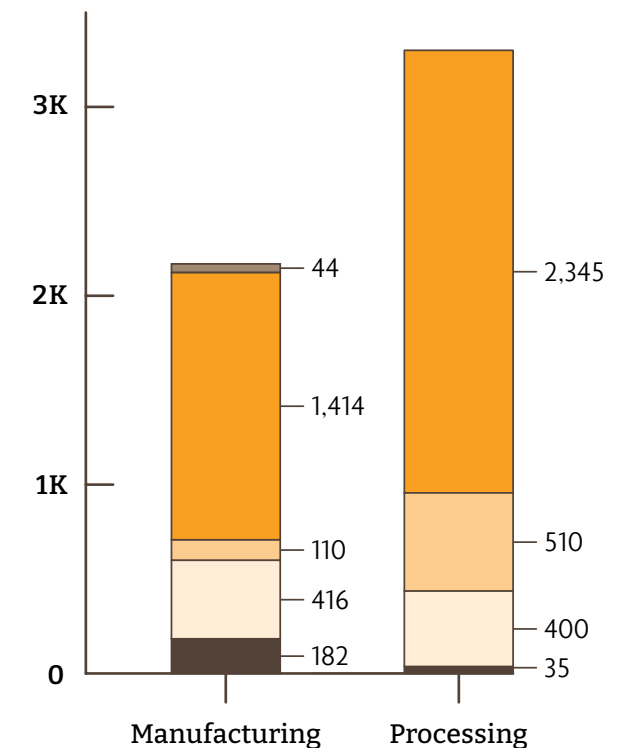


Food Manufacturing & Processing Employment

In Central Texas, **2,166** people are employed in **food manufacturing** and an additional **3,290** are employed in food processing.

Number of Employees by County

No data available for food processing employees in Caldwell County





Food Markets & Retail

How food is sold and purchased.

Austin is a top food destination because of its vibrant and diverse food scene with offerings across restaurants, bars, venues, and food trucks. The birthplace of Whole Foods and Wheatsville Food Co-op, Central Texas is also home to several chain grocery stores and a thriving farmers' market scene with 25 markets providing fresh, local food.

Local regulation of food businesses largely focuses on planning and zoning requirements and ensuring food safety. The City of Austin also considers ways to support and incentivize food retail, particularly small food businesses and those with Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, and female owners. Currently, the Office of Sustainability is leading a pilot of the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#), the most comprehensive, values-based food purchasing framework in the US. This program has helped large institutions, such as the Austin Independent School District and the University of Texas, serve millions of meals featuring healthy, local food.

Trends and Challenges

- Access to capital is a major barrier for new and small food businesses.
- Food procurement at large institutions is often based on the cheapest bid rather than quality or other values.
- As **frontline workers**, food retail and service workers often lack a safe working environment, fair pay, and benefits.

Policy Actions

In 2011, the Austin-Travis County Food Policy Board made [recommendations](#) to Council to reform farmers' market permitting to better support direct-to-consumer sales.

In 2019, [state legislation](#) capped annual farmers' market permitting fees at \$100 statewide.

In 2021, [Austin City Council directed](#) American Rescue Plan Act funds to be used toward the creation of a community-owned food retail establishment, which could open as early as 2024 following a community co-creation process.

In 2021, the Austin Climate Equity Plan called for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from institutional, commercial, and government purchasing by at least 50% by 2030.

"Food brings people together, so to truly be a commUNITY, let's be sure that all of our neighbors have access to healthy food options."

EMLYN LEE
BRAVE Communities

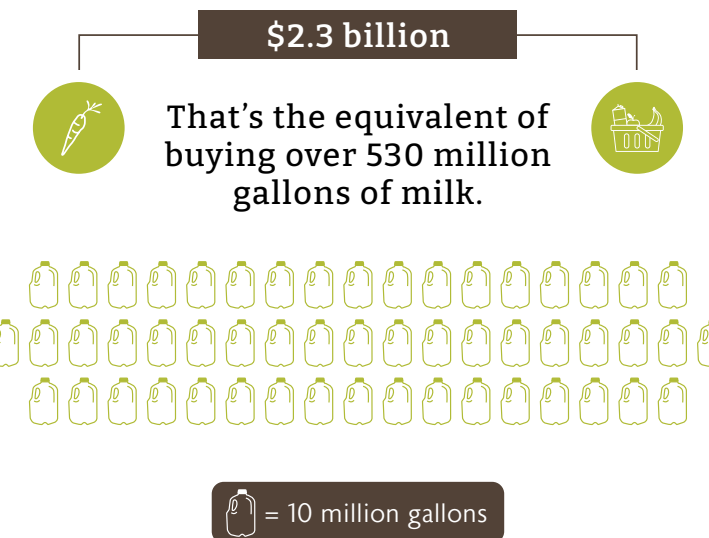
Key Questions

- How can we support community-driven or publicly-owned food retail models?
- How might we increase access to capital and assistance for small and legacy food businesses?
- What role can food businesses play in food system resilience and disaster response efforts?
- How might we support our food industry workforce, and workers of color in particular?

Facts

Central Texas has **25 Farmers Markets** and **18 CSAs**. Combined with farm stands, these services provide **\$7.7 million** in direct-to-consumer agriculture sales.

The gap between the total food purchased and the total food produced in Central Texas is **\$2.3 billion**.



Based on May 2022 national pricing data from the [USDA](#).

Food Consumption & Access

How we eat our food, who struggles to get enough food, and what impact our consumption has on our health.

Access to healthy, affordable, and **culturally relevant food** is essential to overall health. Food insecurity is associated with severe yet preventable health conditions, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, anemia, developmental delays in children, mental health issues like depression and anxiety, and more.

A household's ability to afford food and other basic needs is a fundamental component of **food security** and strongly correlated with income. Additionally, people in our community with unstable housing or who are experiencing homelessness often face more barriers to accessing food programs and benefits. This is due in part to lack of access to a phone, computer, mailing address, documents, and transportation.

To strengthen community food access, we can make food easier to get by increasing availability and improving mobility options. Programs such as [Fresh for Less](#), the [Neighborhood Pop-Up Grocery Program](#) pilot, the [Healthy Corner Stores Initiative](#), and programs aimed at increasing purchasing power for families receiving government benefits have worked to address the gap in food access. Still, 18 out of 47 zip codes in Travis County lack a grocery store.

Trends and Challenges

- For many in our city, the availability of healthy and affordable food is limited.
- Communities of color in Austin disproportionately experience food insecurity and are harder hit during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Food assistance programs such as **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** are underutilized.
- Most adults in Travis County are not consuming enough fruits or vegetables.

Policy Actions

In 2016, City Council [passed a resolution](#) aimed at developing recommendations for improving access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Funding was established for the "Fresh for Less" food access projects.

Acting on recommendations from a community working group, City Council [approved an ordinance](#) to exempt charitable feeding organizations from the fixed **food establishment** permit fee in 2021. This policy change removed institutional policy barriers for charitable feeding activities.

In 2021, the Austin Climate Equity Plan called for ensuring access to a community-driven food system through addressing food insecurity, prioritizing **regenerative agriculture**, supporting dietary and health agency, promoting **plant-based foods**, and minimizing food waste.

The City is currently developing a Disaster Food and Drinking Water Access Plan to develop protocols for the swift distribution of food and water during climate-related and other disasters.

Key Questions

- How could full participation in federal nutrition programs be ensured?
- How might food access programs in low-income communities and communities of color be supported without increasing gentrification?
- What support can be provided for communities to implement their own solutions to food insecurity?
- Amid the climate crisis, how can the City work with food producers, food retailers, and community members to promote a food system that is more resilient and prepared for disruptions?
- How can access to nutritious, healthy, and culturally relevant food be ensured throughout a person's entire lifespan?

Facts

Within Travis County there are:

 → **101** Supermarkets

 → **583** Convenience Stores

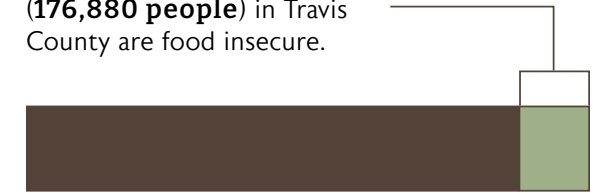
The City of Austin's budget allocated **\$3.3 million** in 2021 for contracts to organizations working to address healthy food access.

84.4% of Travis County Residents do not meet daily fruit and vegetable intake recommendations.

Every year, **3.5 million metric tonnes** of greenhouse gas are emitted through food consumption in Austin. That's the equivalent of powering **681,011 homes** per year.

Food Insecurity in Travis County

14.4% of the population (**176,880 people**) in Travis County are food insecure.



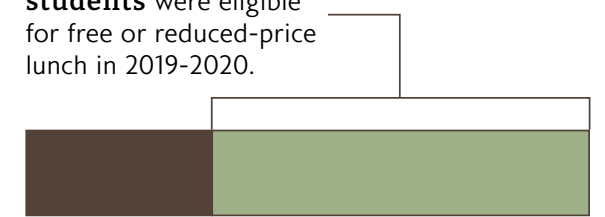
Nearly half (46%) of income-eligible people in Travis County are not enrolled in SNAP.



The percentage of food insecurity is slightly higher among children. **15.2% of all children** in Travis County (**41,130 children**) are food insecure.



67% of Austin ISD students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2019-2020.



Nearly **1 in 3 college students** experience food insecurity.

Post-Consumption & Food Waste

What happens to the parts of food we don't eat and the impact of food waste on the environment.

Every day, 1.24 million pounds of food are wasted in Austin, with significant environmental implications. This **food waste** often ends up in landfills, which generates methane — the most potent greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change. Decomposing food in landfills accounts for about 2% of our community's total greenhouse gas emissions. While Austin Resource Recovery is the department responsible for tracking and managing food waste, regulations at all levels of government that cover food safety, expiration, and donation affect the amount of food thrown away.

After reducing the amount of **surplus food**, the best use for unsold or uneaten food is feeding people and animals. In Austin, several organizations focused on **food recovery**, such as [Keep Austin Fed](#), [Save the Food Austin](#), and the [Central Texas Food Bank](#), help “rescue” food through donation programs that would otherwise be wasted. Other enterprising operations, such as Too Good to Go, help connect consumers with discounted food that local businesses would have otherwise discarded at the end of the day.

For food that cannot be recovered, **composting** can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The City of Austin promotes composting by offering [compost collection](#) to all residential curbside customers.

Trends and Challenges

- Issues around food safety, liability, cost, and lack of clarity present barriers to surplus food donations.
- Challenges for commercial and multifamily composting include hauling organic matter, high collection fees, cumbersome permitting processes, contamination issues, and more.

Policy Actions

In 1996, the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#) encouraged companies and organizations to donate healthy food that would otherwise go to waste by protecting them from criminal and civil liability.

In 2014, the City of Austin's [Universal Recycling Ordinance](#) began requiring food establishments to ensure that employees have access to food donation or composting methods.

As part of the City of Austin's Zero Waste goal to divert 90% of materials from landfills by 2040, in 2017, Austin Resource Recovery launched a four-year phased Curbside Composting Program, which now collects organic material from 210,000 homes.

“Effective food recovery requires massive coordination, education, and resources to provide healthy food to everyone in a just and dignified manner.”

LISA BARDEN
Keep Austin Fed

Key Questions

- How can generators of discarded food, such as restaurants and grocery stores, build relationships with local or regional farms in need of feedstock?
- How might we create higher demand for locally produced compost?
- How can we reduce food waste in our community?
- How might we reduce food insecurity through the coordination and donation of surplus food?
- How could we track food waste and consumption data through the lens of greenhouse gas emissions?

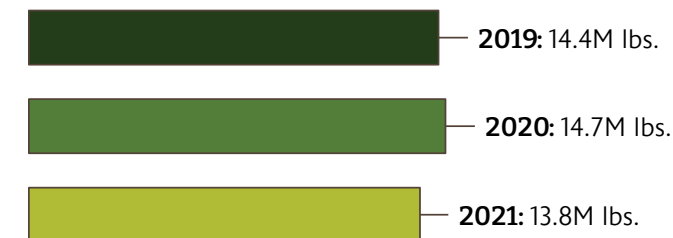
Facts

1.24 million pounds of food are wasted **every day** in the Austin Area.

Food wasted in Austin is responsible for **1.2 million metric tonnes** of greenhouse gas emissions each year. That's the equivalent of using 1.4 million gallons of gasoline.

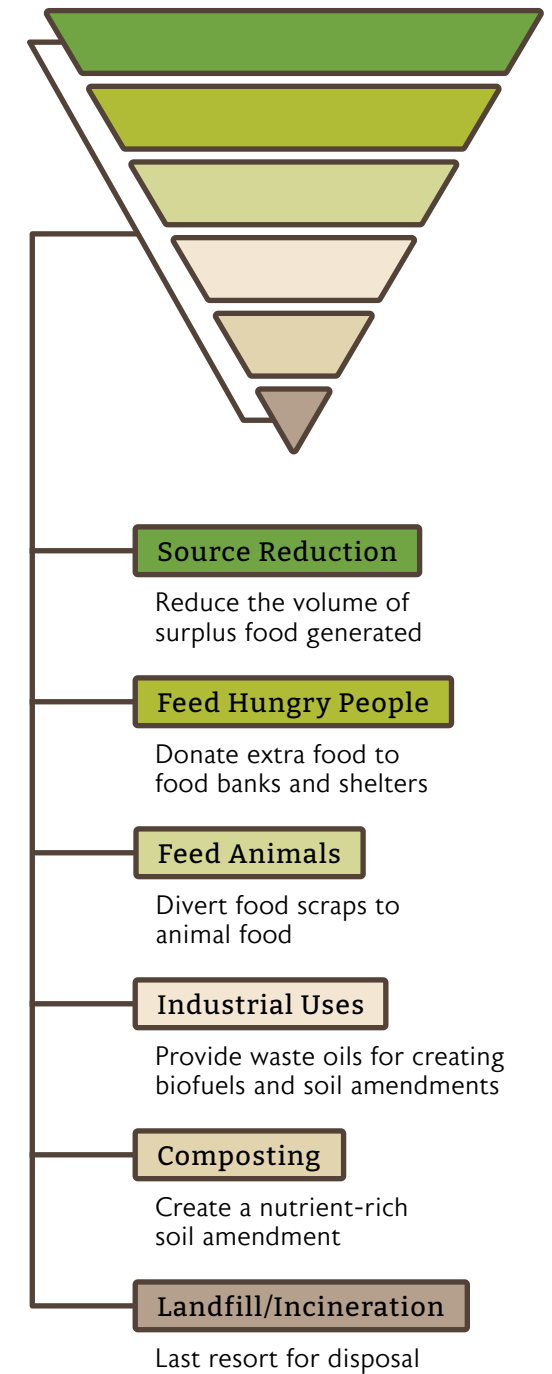
210,000 households have access to curbside composting in 2020, representing a **130%** increase from 2018 (**120,000**).

From 2019-2021, **42.9 million pounds** of food was recovered for human consumption in Central Texas.



Food Recovery Heirarchy

From most to least preferred



Adapted from the EPA.

Food Justice

How systemic racism and colonization impact how the food system works – or doesn't work – for each member of our community.

Throughout this report, we have discussed the many ways racial inequities show up in our food system. The impact of colonization and enslavement can be seen across all areas of the food system as low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to experience food insecurity, higher rates of serious health impacts like cardiovascular disease and diabetes, barriers to starting a food business, and more.

To eliminate racial and class disparities within the food system, we must acknowledge the right of people to maintain agency and control over their food and agriculture systems. For policymakers to meaningfully address justice issues within the food system and co-create solutions alongside community members, we must build trust with Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latinx communities in Central Texas. We must also help restore and maintain food systems that support self-determination, health, cultures, values, and community while being willing to confront the legacy of colonialism and white supremacy by deepening our understanding of our ancestral history and its continuing ripple effects.

Trends and Challenges

- Displacement and structural racism have led to racial disparities in the food system, including disinvestment and higher rates of food insecurity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes in communities of color.
- Colonization and the imposed Western diet have disrupted Indigenous agricultural and cultural food practices. Seed saving and the revitalization of traditional foods offer opportunities to promote **food sovereignty** and resilience.
- Decisions around food policy have been largely dominated by white voices.
- People who work in food production and retail, positions disproportionately held by people of color, are often paid low wages with few or no benefits.

Policy Actions

In 2016, the City of Austin's [Equity Office](#) was created to advance **racial equity** in all aspects of City operations.

In 2018, the City of Austin [enacted a policy](#) that would require businesses to provide paid sick leave to employees, but the State legislature retroactively preempted it. The Texas Supreme Court declined to review the case, allowing the state rule to stand, and blocking Austin and other cities from enforcing this type of policy.

The Office of Sustainability launched the [Food Justice Mini Grants Program](#) in 2020, which directs funding to organizations that are led by and serve those most negatively impacted by the food system. \$50,000 was distributed to [20 food justice organizations](#) in 2021.

Key Questions

- What are the barriers to community involvement and advocacy within the local food system?
- How can we support and develop leaders from low-income communities and communities of color that have been excluded from food policy conversations?
- How can public officials in city and county government develop trusting and reciprocal relationships with communities of color?
- How can we incorporate expertise from Indigenous agricultural practices in food planning efforts?
- How might the people who bring food to our tables benefit more proportionally from Austin's robust economy?

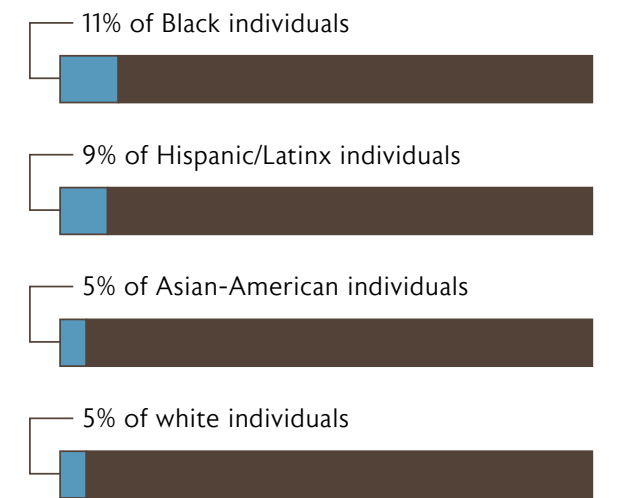
"It's frustrating to be surrounded by nothing but fast food, dollar stores, and gas stations."

DISTRICT ONE RESIDENT
2018 Food Environmental Analysis

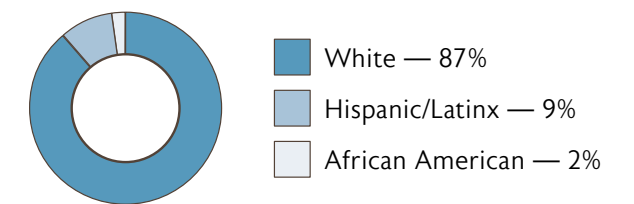
Facts

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, **60% of Hispanic/Latinx individuals** reported being food insecure compared to **24% of white individuals** in Austin.

Black individuals in Travis County are more likely to live in areas that face the **highest barriers** to food access.



Most farmers in Central Texas are white.



Thousands of Black incarcerated individuals, who are disproportionately represented in the carceral system, are currently forced to produce food for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, which maintains over 130,000 acres of agricultural land.

Next Steps

A Call to Action

To plan for the future, it is important to understand both the past and present. This report helps set the stage for developing Austin's first-ever Food Plan by creating shared context around our current local food system. We acknowledge that the trends, policies, and key questions outlined in this report may offer a limited perspective and only scratch the surface of a complex and global food system. However, we hope it can be a springboard to help launch our community toward the next important step of developing a comprehensive Food Plan.

Over the next year, we'll be developing a community engagement and co-creation strategy to help shape the Food Plan. We'll be partnering with and listening to nonprofits, businesses, institutions, policymakers, funders, community organizations, leaders, and individuals and would love to include your perspective in our work. There will be many ways to contribute to this plan, whether you have two minutes or 20 hours to offer. We want to make it easy, accessible, and engaging to have your voice and experience reflected. Together, we can create a shared vision for a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient food system in Austin.

If you'd like to get involved in helping us create the plan, [please complete our interest form](#). You can use it to tell us about the issues that are important to you and specify how you might like to engage with us — by sharing a story, joining an advisory group, serving as a liaison to the community as a Food Ambassador, participating on the Community Advisory Committee, or simply receiving regular updates. For some of these opportunities, stipends will be available.

The future of Austin's food system and its impact on each of us is guided by the actions we take today. As individuals, we may feel like small players in a complex system, but together our voice and power are mighty. We hope that this planning process results in not just another plan that sits on a shelf but rather a network of strengthened relationships, partnerships, and commitments to align our actions and build something better for ourselves and future generations. We look forward to seeing what this community can imagine and do together.

Get Involved



Scan the QR Code to complete any of the actions below.

Fill out our interest form:

bit.ly/FoodMattersATX

Sign up for Austin Food Notes for food policy-related updates:

bit.ly/OOSNewsATX

Visit our website:

www.austintexas.gov/food

Send us an email:

sustainability@austintexas.gov

Austinites wait in line to order from a local food truck.



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Thank you to the Multicultural Refugee Coalition for our cover image.

Finally, we recognize and offer gratitude to the farmers, farmworkers, servers, meatpackers, grocery clerks, and all the essential workers who put food on our plates every day.

*A local chef prepares
a dish at Buenos
Aires Café.*



Glossary

2-1-1	A phone number used to connect people to information and referral services for health, human, and social service organizations.
Central Texas	For the purposes of this report, “Central Texas” refers to the 5-county Metropolitan Statistical Area of Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson Counties.
circular economy	A model of production and consumption which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible.
community garden	A site for growing produce for non-commercial use operated and maintained by volunteers and divided into individual or shared plots and common areas.
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	A system that connects the producer and consumers within the food system by allowing the consumer to subscribe to the harvest of a certain farm or group of farms.
composting	A controlled decomposition of organic matter which results in a product that can improve soil by increasing organic matter, water holding capacity, and nutrient availability.
consumer packaged goods	Products that consumers use daily and re-purchase frequently such as toiletries, food, and beverages.
culturally relevant food	Food items that reflect the preferences and cultural contexts of the community.
farm	Any place that produces and sells at least \$1,000 of agricultural products during a given year and is owned or run by a farm operator.
food aggregator	An operation that brings produce from multiple sources together to create a larger and more consistent supply to meet consumer demand.
food business or food establishment	An operation that stores, prepares, packages, serves, vends, or otherwise provides food for human consumption. This does not include establishments that offer only prepackaged foods, produce stands, or food processing plants.
food distribution	The process of transporting, storing, and selling food to entities other than individual consumers, such as grocery stores.

food forest	A community-led edible forest garden that is free and open to the public.
food hub	A business or organization that connects farmers to larger markets by handling the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of their products.
food insecurity	When a person lacks reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food.
food justice	Seeks to ensure that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown, produced, transported, distributed, accessed, and eaten are shared fairly. It represents a transformation of the current food system, including but not limited to eliminating disparities and inequities.
food manufacturing	The processing or packing of any food product for wholesale distribution or retail sale.
food plan or food system plan	A set of interconnected, forward-thinking activities that strengthen a community's food system through the creation and implementation of plans and policies.
food processing	The activities that make raw agricultural products edible, the combination of ingredients into food products, and activities involved in the commercial production of "highly processed" foods.
food recovery	The various ways that prevent surplus food from being sent to the landfill, which provides a variety of social, economic, and environmental benefits.
food retail	A food establishment or section of an establishment where food and food products are offered to a consumer and intended for off-premise consumption.
food security	When all people at all times have enough food for an active, healthy life.
food sovereignty	The right of communities to define their own food and agriculture systems.
food system	An interconnected network that includes everything that happens with food — where and how it is grown, distributed, sold, consumed, wasted, or recovered.
food system policy	The set of laws and regulations that inform how, why, and when food is produced, transported, distributed, and consumed.
food waste	Food loss that occurs at any stage of the production and supply chain, which can be caused by spoilage at the production level, over-ordering at the retail level, or over-purchasing at the individual level.

frontline workers	Employees working in essential industries who must physically show up to work, which include many food retail, production, and processing jobs.
plant-based foods	Foods consisting of ingredients derived from plants that include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, seeds, or legumes.
racial equity	When race no longer predicts success and quality of life outcomes improve for all.
regenerative agriculture	Generally defined as an approach to farming that works in harmony with natural systems and focuses on soil health and climate resilience. However, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latinx farmers have criticized the movement for erasing their foundational contributions.
the right to food	Generally understood as the right to feed oneself in dignity. The right to adequate food is a long-standing international human right to which many countries are committed.
resilience	The ability to prepare for, withstand, and recover from a crisis or disruption. A resilient food system can withstand and recover from disruptions in a way that ensures a sufficient supply of accessible food for all.
sharecropper	A farmer who rents small plots of land from a landowner in return for a portion of their crop, to be given to the landowner at the end of each year. In the rural South, sharecropping was typically practiced by formerly enslaved people.
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	A federally funded program administered at the state level that provides a monthly cash voucher to qualifying households and individuals that can be spent only on food. SNAP was previously referred to as "food stamps."
surplus food	Food that is safe and nutritious, but is discarded by producers, suppliers, distributors, or retailers for a variety of reasons. These food items can be legally donated to nonprofits.
tenant farmer	A farmer who works land owned by another and pays rent either in cash or in shares of produce.
urban farm	A site in a city at least one acre in size used to sustainably produce agricultural products to be sold for profit. Many urban farms may also provide agricultural education activities.



Appendix I: Extended Data

See the [extended data spreadsheet](#) for details on data sources.

Appendix II: Citations

See [all citations](#) used in creating this report.



Staff at El Buen Samaritano package food for distribution.

“There are genuinely sufficient resources in the world to ensure that no one, nowhere, at no time, should go hungry.”

CLARENCE QUIDRY
Black Leaders Collective



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SUSTAINABILITY

CITY OF AUSTIN

austintexas.gov/food