

# 2019 Rutherford County Baseline Food Assessment



RUTHERFORD  
POLK  
MCDOWELL HEALTH DISTRICT

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**Introduction**

Increasing access to healthy foods was chosen as a strategic priority for the years 2018-2019 by the Rutherford-Polk-McDowell Health District’s Healthy Communities Program in response to high rates of obesity and chronic diet-related disease. The Rutherford Health Department spent one year investigating several initiatives to move this priority onward and ultimately found that the best way to contribute to supporting the advancement of Rutherford County resident’s health was to conduct a county-wide baseline food assessment--a basic documentation of Rutherford County’s food system.

There are many lenses through which to understand a food system's workings, and potential documentation methods and focal points are diverse. The most important thing to know about food systems is that they are large, complex, politically impacted, and not sovereign from the larger political/economic system of the United States. This food assessment documents the basics of the Rutherford County food system: what and where foods are grown, sold, processed, and how local consumers are impacted, this being the central focus.

Because one year is insufficient to sow and reap profoundly effective and sustainable food systems work, the intent is that this assessment can be used as a guide to support meaningful and persistent action that endures for years to come.

**Executive Summary**

From farm to fork, feeding ourselves is no simple feat. Rather, a perceptively simple, biological task enmeshed in a complicated web of capitalist policy, with conjuncting realities like class (race, sex, socioeconomic), economy, income, land, rapid climate change, industrial society, food cultures, etc., all of which everyone is influenced, obligated, subject, or vulnerable to, in some

way or another. Such realities promise incredible influence on the way people, and societies as a whole, consume food, and what rewards or consequences might ensue. Local food systems are situated within this political and economic context that houses the U.S' national food system, of which the primary focus is earning profit, not necessarily nourishing people. When considering access to healthy foods, we are considering most of all this complicated system, which serves as the ruling context for food access. This should not be ignored or taken for granted.

Making a healthy choice is often a responsibility that many place solely upon the individual. Before doing this, however; it is important to acknowledge each factor that goes into the possibility of choice, as many of our choices are out of our hands until they are in fact, available to us. To illustrate, there are thousands of rice varieties (choice) that come in many different sizes, colors, and flavor profiles. Many people are unaware of this diversity because the choices have never been presented. At a standard grocery store, there are, in general, two kinds of rice: white and brown, with some variation between long and short grain, and sometimes wild. Therefore, the choices we make are impacted by the availability, accessibility, knowledge of, and familiarity with such choices. One cannot make a healthier, more nutritious choice—one being black forbidden rice, for instance—when it is not there to choose from. Just because there are many possibilities does not mean they are all within reach or even known about.

When it comes to food access and health, the same principle applies. People will not access what is not there, what is not affordable, and something that does not appeal to their senses. Mental (knowledge), emotional (comfort or pleasure), and technical (cooking skills or cooking appliances) barriers are just as compelling as financial ones. Taste, dietary preferences or limitations, familiarity with food, and cultural context are the things people value most about food, even healthy eaters. This should not be taken for granted either. It is *the* main reason why diets fail so often: people don't enjoy the food they feel they have to eat—it simply doesn't taste good. Food brings us joy, it adds color and multi-dimension to our lives. It is a biological necessity that we are conveniently very happy to indulge because it's enjoyable! No matter the financial circumstances this should not be taken from people. Healthy foods are important and so are foods that taste good. If the consumer is eating healthy food that isn't enjoyable, they will eventually go back to foods that do satisfy the senses, which are often foods that are unhealthy. Thus, the cycle of un-health.

At the crux of any healthy diet are whole foods. In our system, one must have sufficient financial power to purchase these foods in abundance; unless of course such a person has a garden, or forages or hunts, something that is not particularly common in Rutherford County, as far as is known. Beyond the senses, economy and income then, are two of the most important aspects of accessing a healthy diet. In our system, money affords choices. Someone with sufficient funds can drive a further distance, shop at more expensive grocery stores, and not only afford more food, but also food of better quality. A healthy diet of whole foods is a financial commitment. It generally costs more money than a diet based on processed foods. Therefore, in most cases, money is a non-negotiable resource, one that thousands in Rutherford County do not have abundant access to. Instant Ramen is cheaper than vegetables and meat used for a salad or homemade soup. Not to mention, Instant Ramen is shelf stable, while produce often lasts about a week, two at most. Even healthy cooking oils can be financially steep. Approximately 22,678

residents of Rutherford County experience food insecurity, which suggests that such people, who already do not have enough money to purchase cheap food, will also not access enough healthy foods. Long-term food insecurity has an enormous negative impact on health and is a direct outcome of low/no income, which can be impacted by the amount of economic opportunity one has access to.

It is a common unconscious belief that food insecurity and excess weight do not go together; the belief being that one who eats a lot is one who weighs a lot, “proving” that such a person has enough food. Though the latter can be true, in some cases someone may be experiencing obesity because of medical conditions (often impacted by diet) and/or because they can only afford (or have access to at pantries) foods that are full of empty calories. For instance, one might eat a cheap diet of deli meat sandwiches with white bread, pasta, frozen pizza, chips, etc. for the cost convenience and the fact that all such options are filling, familiar, and taste good. It’s common knowledge that a diet reliant upon processed convenience foods is extremely vulnerable to excess weight and diet-related disease. For many who experience food insecurity, however; this is a significant reality that is not necessarily chosen.

Beyond poverty and food insecurity, diet-related health issues are equally pervasive among all socioeconomic classes, including upper and middle class residents. The mainstream American diet is filled with refined carbohydrates and other processed foods, intended to be both time and energy-efficient to suit the standard American lifestyle, which involves long hours away from home and a desire to save money. Many of these foods have been scientifically studied to determine if any addictive qualities are present—particularly wheat-products, cheese, and sugars. Conclusions about whether and how such foods are indeed addictive remain controversial. What is known, however, is that such foods are not well tolerated by many people’s bodies (sugar being the most intolerable), despite some forms being considered healthy by a general standard (e.g., whole grain bread, low-fat dairy, and alternative sweeteners). Because these foods are often financially accessible, sensually satisfying, and filling, they’re in high demand. Rutherford County’s restaurants, like much of the nation, serve these kinds of foods most commonly. It is significant to note this, as eating out is a consistent part of many American’s eating habits, and therefore diets. It’s also significant to note what kinds of foods are popular within the restaurants of a particular area, as this exposes what foods a population is generally receptive to, as restaurants are not successful if their food isn’t approachable or well-liked by their audience. As will be explored further, there are approximately 58 restaurants in Rutherford County, not including hot bars and take out counters available in grocery stores. All other restaurants are sit-down/dine-in restaurants, many of which are independently owned, and the rest of which are franchises. Most of these restaurants serve foods like sandwiches, hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza, fries, pasta, nachos, tacos, burritos, fried foods, etc. Many restaurants also put efforts toward creating healthy options on their menus by including things like salads and healthy sandwiches. There are very few restaurants that are known for having particularly healthy options and many people travel out of the county to eat a healthy meal, or just eat at home.

73% of Rutherford County residents are either overweight or obese. According to 2018’s Community Health Assessment, only 7% of surveyed people said they consume adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables per day. The main difference across socioeconomic status is the

ability to choose a healthy or unhealthy diet. People who are food insecure or low income often cannot afford to consistently eat healthy. The feeling of hunger must be addressed before sufficient nutrition. People who are not food insecure, however, can afford to maintain a healthy diet, but often struggle because of cravings and preferences for unhealthy convenience foods. Ultimately, once financial burdens are abolished, people have to *want* to eat healthy.

This assessment is written from this context: that systematic realities, economy, income, food preferences, and sensory satisfaction are the most important factors when it comes to accessing healthy foods. There must be an abundance of tasty, affordable and culturally relevant foods, people must know how and be able to cook them, and they must enjoy what they eat. Otherwise, healthy foods cannot and will not be accessed.

## Chapter One

### A Profile of Rutherford County

#### **Section 1: Health, Economy, Income, and Food Insecurity**

##### **Population**

Rutherford County is thought of as a small county, but is actually quite large compared to its neighbors Polk (population of 20,588 people) and McDowell (population of 45,159 people) counties. Rutherford County is home to 66,701 people, the biggest county in its health district. The 2018 Community Health Assessment states, “There is a slightly higher proportion of females than males (51.4% female, 48.6% male) and 19.5% of the population is 65 years and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The majority of residents are White (85.5%) with minorities represented as follows: Black or African American (10.3%), Hispanic or Latino (4.0%), Asian (0.5%), American Indian/Alaska Native (0.5%), and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (0.0%). (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).”

##### **Economy**

For many years Rutherford County’s local economy was centered around manufacturing, specifically the textile industry. However, the mid-90s began a several-year procession of outsourced textile and mill jobs, leading to an enormous and devastating void in the county’s economy. Eventually the community’s unemployment rate peaked at 19%, one of the highest in the state. Many remember the mills as more than places of employment, but also important community pillars. Mill owners, as one forum attendee remembers, were often philanthropic and community-minded, as leaders and employees were all from the community. When mills closed, people were left to choose from a limited number of jobs within the school system, health care, or hospitality/service jobs, some of which were unachievable for those with limited education.

Today only 6.1% of Rutherford County is unemployed, a very significant and distinguishable improvement. Its leading work sectors are Education and Health Services, Public Administration; Trade, Transportation, & Utilities (Wal-Mart, Ingles, Duke Energy, and Parker Hannifin Corporation); Manufacturing, and Professional and Business Services. (North Carolina Rutherford County Economic Development, Rutherford County, NC-Top 25 Employers, 2019)

Rank	Year	Period	Company Name	Industry	Employment Range
1	2018	3	Rutherford County Board of Education	Education & Health Services	1000+
2	2018	3	County Of Rutherford	Public Administration	500-999
3	2018	3	Rutherford Regional Health System	Education & Health Services	250-499
4	2018	3	Isothermal Community College	Education & Health Services	250-499
5	2018	3	Wal-Mart Associates Inc.	Trade, Transportation & Utilities	250-499
6	2018	3	American Greetings Corporation	Information	250-499
7	2018	3	Rosendin Electric Inc	Construction	250-499
8	2018	3	Westrock Services Inc	Manufacturing	250-499
9	2018	3	Ingles Markets, Inc	Trade, Transportation & Utilities	250-499
10	2018	3	Ameridial Inc	Professional & Business Services	250-499
11	2018	3	Trelleborg Coated Systems Us Inc	Manufacturing	100-249
12	2018	3	Watts Regulator Company (A Corp)	Manufacturing	100-249
13	2018	3	The Timken Company	Manufacturing	100-249
14	2018	3	Rumbling Bald Resort	Leisure & Hospitality	100-249
15	2018	3	Everest Textile USA Llc	Manufacturing	100-249
16	2018	3	Town of Forest City	Public Administration	100-249
17	2018	3	Duke Energy Carolinas Llc	Trade, Transportation, & Utilities	100-249
18	2018	3	Fountain Electric & Services	Construction	100-249
19	2018	3	Rutherford Management Corp	Leisure & Hospitality	100-249
20	2018	3	Carpenter Design Welding Inc	Manufacturing	100-249
21	2018	3	Parker Hannifin Corporation	Trade, Transportation & Utilities	100-249
22	2018	3	Talentforce	Professional & Business Services	100-249
23	2018	3	Hire Dynamics Llc	Professional & Business Services	100-249
24	2018	3	Lowes Home Centers Inc	Trade, Transportation, & Utilities	100-249
25	2018	3	Parton Lumber Co Inc	Manufacturing	100-249

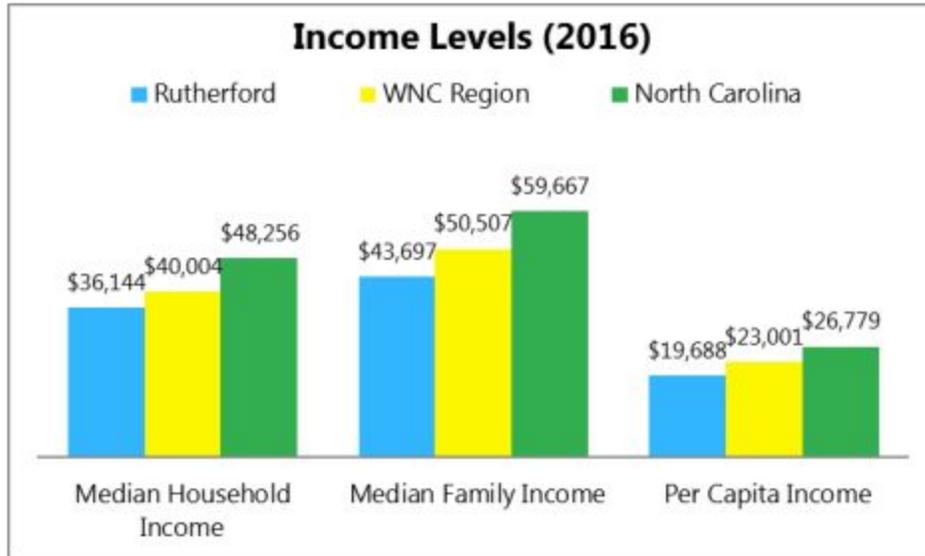
Source: [NC Department of Commerce, Labor & Economic Development Analysis Division](#),  
3rd QTR 2018

(North Carolina Rutherford County Economic Development, Rutherford County, NC-Top 25 Employers, 2019)

## Income, Poverty, and Food Insecurity

### Income

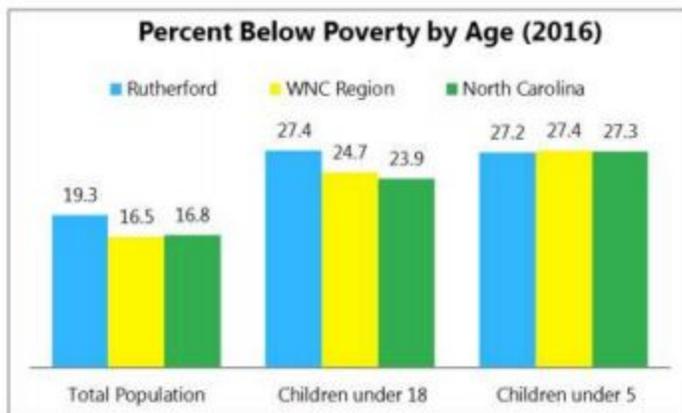
Rutherford County's income levels are some of the lowest in the state, as well as the region (see chart below for comparison). The median household income is \$36,144, the median family income is \$43,697, and the per capita income is \$19,688.



(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

### Poverty

According to a 2016 statistic, 19.3% (12,873 people) of the total population, 27.4% of children under 18, and 27.2% of children under five, live below the poverty level.



Poverty

Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates (S1701). Retrieved April 3, 2018, from U.S. Census Bureau American FactFinder website: <http://factfinder2.census.gov>

(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

## Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined by The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. See below, for a further detailed description, is the USDA's "Ranges of Food Security and Food Insecurity." (ers.usda.org. 2019.)

### *Ranges of Food Security and Food Insecurity*

In 2006, USDA introduced new language to describe ranges of severity of food insecurity. USDA made these changes in response to recommendations by an expert panel convened at USDA's request by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies. Even though new labels were introduced, the methods used to assess households' food security remained unchanged, so statistics for 2005 and later years are directly comparable with those for earlier years for the corresponding categories.

USDA's labels describe ranges of food security

#### Food Security

- High food security (*old label=Food security*): no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
- Marginal food security (*old label=Food security*): one or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.

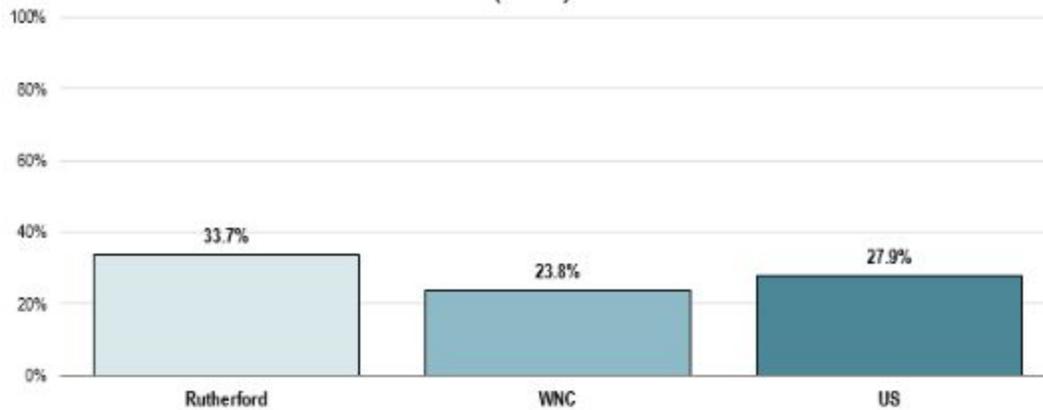
#### Food Insecurity

- Low food security (*old label=Food insecurity without hunger*): reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- Very low food security (*old label=Food insecurity with hunger*): Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.

(ers.usda.org. 2019.)

22,678 people (33.7% of the population) are food insecure, a statistic that's higher than both the Western North Carolina average, and well as the average for the country. In 2018, 43.2% of Community Health Assessment survey respondents shared that they either always (4.9%), usually (10.2%), sometimes (17.4%), or seldom (10.7%) have experienced worry/stress in the past year about having enough money to buy nutritious meals. It is, of course, ideal that this percentage be at zero. 22,678 is a very high number of residents experiencing food insecurity, no matter how often. Further, there are 13,569 SNAP participants in Rutherford County. 10,811 are white, 2,475 are African American, 5,340 are people under 18, and 3,783 are children 5-17. (2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

## Food Insecurity (2018)



(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

## Food & Nutrition Services (SNAP)

January 2018									
	Cases	Participants	Caucasian	African American	Other Races	Hispanic	Individuals 65 and Older	Individuals Under 18	Children aged 5 to 17
Rutherford	6,144	13,569	10,811	2,475	283	519	1,096	5,340	3,783

(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

### Health

Diet-related diseases are at the top of the list for leading causes of death in Rutherford County where many residents are overweight or obese. It is also currently home to many food deserts (see page 14 for definition) and people who experience, or have experienced, food insecurity. The 2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment documented, “Over one-third of Rutherford County residents state they experience food insecurity,” and “only 7% indicate they are consuming five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.”

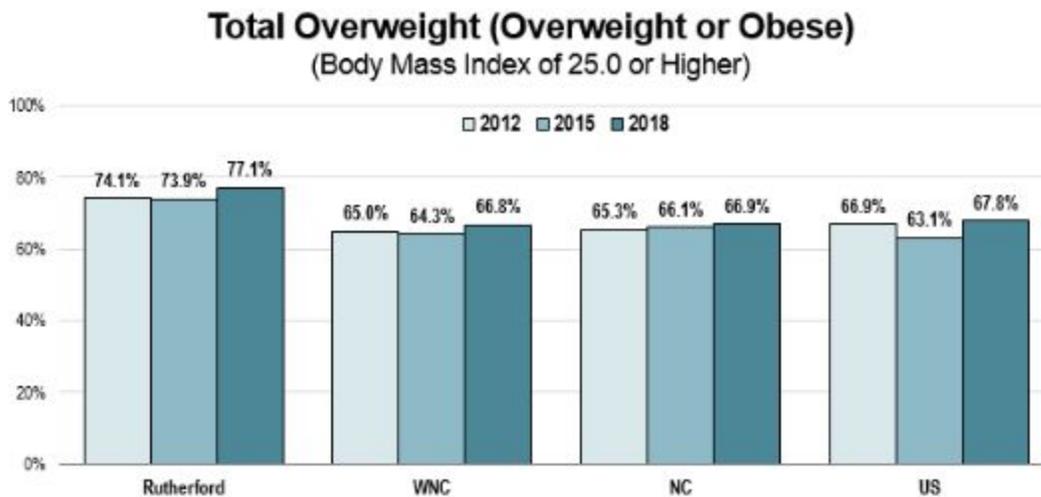
If one is not eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day, such a diet can be understood to be generally consistent of meats and carbohydrates, and in most cases refined carbohydrates. This most commonly leads to excess weight and diet-related illness. This dynamic is a direct impact of national systematic factors that lie far outside of the control of the consumer, despite socio-economic status, and many leading agencies and organizations who wish to help. What varies among class, however, is how one reaches such a predicament, most of which comes down to being able to afford a choice in the matter.

## Weight

The 2018 Community Health Assessment states that 21.6% of Rutherford County residents are at a healthy weight, a percentage that has decreased since 2015. This percentage is also much lower than the regional and state averages (see chart below). The percentage of overweight or obese citizens is at 77.1%. As is reflected in the former statistic, this percentage is higher than both the regional and state averages. 49.8% of this average is made up of people who are obese. (2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)



(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)



(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

These statistics are reflective of the pervasivity of unhealthy eating across socio-economic status. They show that most people in Rutherford County are overweight or obese at numbers greater

than the county poverty level, food insecurity, or SNAP. Thus, the reality of afflicted health touches almost everyone in Rutherford County, for varying reasons.

Chronic Diet-Related Disease

The leading causes of death in Rutherford County that are diet-related or diet-influenced are as follows:

Heart disease (#1), cancer (#2), chronic lower respiratory disease (#3), cerebrovascular disease (#4), and diabetes (#6). A poor diet has also been understood to have connections to alzhiemers (#7) and suicide (#8). (2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

Rank	Cause of Death	Rutherford	
		# Deaths	Death Rate
1	Diseases of Heart	932	200.8
2	Cancer	827	170.1
3	Chronic Lower Respiratory Diseases	343	70.1
4	Cerebrovascular Disease	269	57.6
5	All Other Unintentional Injuries	159	42.5
6	Diabetes Mellitus	139	29.3
7	Alzheimer's disease	108	23.3
8	Suicide	69	19.3
9	Nephritis, Nephrotic Syndrome, and Nephrosis	85	17.6
10	Unintentional Motor Vehicle Injuries	54	15.8
11	Septicemia	72	15.6
12	Pneumonia and Influenza	67	15.1
13	Chronic Liver Disease and Cirrhosis	60	13.2
14	Homicide	<b>14</b>	<b>4.7</b>
15	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome	<b>4</b>	<b>1.3</b>
All Causes (some not listed)		4,257	930.6

LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH

Note: Rates based on fewer than 20 cases (indicated by N/A) are unstable and have been presented in bold.

Note: Death rates are age-adjusted

Source for unstable rates: 2016 North Carolina Vital Statistics, Volume 2: Leading Causes of Death. Retrieved June 22, 2018 from North Carolina Center for Health Statistics Vital Statistics website: <https://schs.dph.ncdhs.gov/data/vital/lcd/2016/>

(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

Diet related statistics:

Prevalence of Heart Disease	11.2 %	Prevalence of Stroke	3.4%
Prevalence of High Blood Pressure	45.1 %	Prevalence of High Blood Cholesterol	42.7%
Prevalence of Diabetes (Ever diagnosed)	20.3 %	Prevalence of Borderline or Pre-Diabetes	8.8%

(2018 Rutherford County Community Health Assessment, 2019)

Diet is the most critical aspect of long-term health and vitality. There can be challenges, however, when it comes to eating a healthy diet. Health is not something many of us grow up practicing, rather it's something we have to re-learn. Because a standard American diet is heavy in fried and processed foods, it is both delicious and harmful to health. It is common to become

driven by cravings for such foods, though such a phenomenon is something that is largely underestimated. Such a diet does not meet, and often afflicts, the nutritional necessities of the body, inevitably causing health issues.

**Section 2: Rutherford County Food System**

Every local food system exists within the context of the national food system. A food system is the working relationship between land, growers/farmers, processors, grocery stores, and consumers. It is the ecological and industrial supply and work chain of the modern age that gets food from the land and into our bodies. It also considers food waste.

**Grocery Stores and Food Outlets**

All major grocery outlets are located within the center of the county (Forest City and Rutherfordton), with the exception of Lake Lure’s Ingles. All other food vendors and outlets are either small franchises such as Dollar General, or are independently owned. Altogether, there are 22 grocery outlets in Forest City, 15 in Rutherfordton, 4 in Spindale, 1 in Lake Lure/Chimney Rock, 4 in Ellenboro, 1 in Union Mills, 3 in Bostic, and 1 in Cliffside.

Grocery Stores

28043	Forest City (22)	-Aldi -Walmart -Carolina Grocery -Plum Natural Market -J’s -Ingles -Food Lion -Dollar General (4) -Hardin’s Drug -Cole’s -El Milargo -ATM (Drop-In Food Store) -Family Dollar -Ollie’s -Chase Convenience Store -Flea Town USA -Drop-In Food Store -Mighty Dollar -Speedway	28139	Rutherfordton (15)	-Food Lion -Bi-Lo -Tony’s Produce -Dollar General(2) -Sunnyside Orchard -Natural Import Company -Family Dollar -CVS -One Stop Store -Fred’s -Circle Food Store -Greenhill Store -BP -Gilkey Grocery Store
28016	Spindale(4)	Save-A-Lot Dollar General Dollar Tree	28746	Chimney Rock/Lake Lure	Ingles

		Big Lots			
28040	Ellenboro(4)	Dollar General Family Dollar Ellenboro Save Mart Kwik Stop	28167	Union Mills	Cane Creek Grocery and Grill
28018	Bostic(3)	-Ralph's produce -Washburn General Store -Drop-In Family Market (Sammy's)	28024	Cliffside	Dollar General

The USDA defines food deserts as, “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers.” (USDA ERS, “Access to Affordable, Nutritious Food is Limited in ‘Food Deserts’, 2019) As seen in the table above, with the exception of Forest City, Rutherfordton, and Spindale, Rutherford County is home to many communities that are considered food deserts. Food deserts are not an issue for people who have transportation and money for transportation. Generally, many prefer to live in rural areas because it's quiet and secluded. Nothing wrong with this! Food deserts become an issue when people live in such areas and do not have access to transportation and cannot go to a grocery store that sells healthier foods further out. In many food deserts there are small convenience stores or mini-marts that sell limited grocery items like canned soups or chili, canned vegetables, deli meat, eggs, milk, cheese, butter, white or whole wheat bread, etc. There are often no fresh fruits or vegetables, with the exception of apples and bananas and sometimes local seasonal fruits like peaches.

#### Fast Food Chains

28043	Forest City(16)	Bojangles Sonic Arby's Wendy's Hardee's McDonald's(2) Zaxby's Long John Silver's Dunkin Donuts Davis Donuts KFC Burger King Taco Bell Papa John's Little Caesars
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		Subway (2)
28139	Rutherfordton(5)	Hardee's KFC Subway Domino's Waffle House
28160	Spindale	McDonald's Top Dog Fast Food
28040	Ellenboro	Kwik Stop

Sit-down/Dine-In Restaurants

28139	Rutherfordton(13)	Mi Pueblito The Olive Tree Rutherford Thai Gregory's The Mason Jar Bee Happy Eats and Sweets Great Wall Jesse James Railroad Express Scoggin's Seafood and Steakhouse Yellow Sun Brewery Main St. Market Copper Penny Grill Gilkey Cafe
28043	Forest City(12)	Mario's Fat Tracy's Cafe at the Mall The Shak Big Dave's Family Seafood Fatz Don Ramon Mi Pueblito Super China Buffet Copper Penny Green's Cafe and Carry Out Davis Donut House
28160	Spindale(9)	Barley's Sakura Express

		Shake Shop Spin City Cafe Asian Wok Carolina Cafe Scott's Take Out 1Chef Dragon Palace
28040	Ellenboro (1)	Fagan's Farm Restaurant

Similarly, almost all restaurants are located within Rutherfordotn, Forest City, and Spindale. There are some restaurants and convenience food counters inside gas stations and mini-marts, often with few healthy options on the menu, if any.

### Local Foods

#### Total and Per Farm Overview, 2017 and change since 2012

	2017	% change since 2012
Number of farms	620	-3
Land in farms (acres)	59,921	+1
Average size of farm (acres)	97	+4
<b>Total</b>	<b>(\$)</b>	
Market value of products sold	45,440,000	+99
Government payments	392,000	+25
Farm-related income	2,238,000	+44
Total farm production expenses	32,303,000	+44
Net cash farm income	15,766,000	+598
<b>Per farm average</b>	<b>(\$)</b>	
Market value of products sold	73,290	+105
Government payments (average per farm receiving)	3,956	+16
Farm-related income	15,760	+79
Total farm production expenses	52,102	+48
Net cash farm income	25,429	+618

#### Local Farms

There are 620 farms in Rutherford County, a 3% decrease since 2012. There is 59,921 acres of farmland and the average size of a farm is 97 acres. The average net cash farm income in Rutherford County is \$25,429, a 618% increase since 2012. Most farms range anywhere between 10-49 and 20-179 acres, 2 of which are over 1,000. These farms are likely raising monocrops, or one crop. Most agricultural sales are from livestock, poultry, and other animal products, ranking at 92%, making the last 8% of sales crops. Most land is used for pastureland

(32%) and woodland (32%), with crops being 31%. 165 acres of crops are for vegetable growing while 12,718 acres are used for forage (hay/haylage) (10,520), soybeans (1,808), and corn for grain (or animal feed) (390).

Livestock is an enormous piece of agriculture in Rutherford County with most of its market value lying in livestock, poultry, and other animal products. Only \$603 of the market value are of vegetables, while \$41,582 are from livestock, poultry, and other animal products. This demonstrates that most of the land and agricultural practice in Rutherford County is geared toward commercial animal farming. Very little land is used for growing fresh, healthy foods of the vegetable/fruit variety, and makes up only \$1,723 of the market value. The money is in animal agriculture. (2017 Census of Agriculture, 2019)

**Farms by Value of Sales**

	Number	Percent of Total <sup>a</sup>
Less than \$2,500	239	39
\$2,500 to \$4,999	100	16
\$5,000 to \$9,999	119	19
\$10,000 to \$24,999	65	10
\$25,000 to \$49,999	26	4
\$50,000 to \$99,999	25	4
\$100,000 or more	46	7

**Farms by Size**

	Number	Percent of Total <sup>a</sup>
1 to 9 acres	33	5
10 to 49 acres	256	41
50 to 179 acres	245	40
180 to 499 acres	78	13
500 to 999 acres	6	1
1,000 + acres	2	(Z)

**Total Producers <sup>c</sup>**

**969**

**Sex**

Male	629
Female	340

**Age**

<35	58
35 – 64	540
65 and older	371

**Race**

American Indian/Alaska Native	14
Asian	2
Black or African American	2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	-
White	942
More than one race	9

**Other characteristics**

Hispanic, Latino, Spanish origin	11
With military service	128
New and beginning farmers	259

**Percent of farms that:**

Have internet access **77**

Farm organically (Z)

Sell directly to consumers **9**

Hire farm labor **16**

Are family farms **98**

**(Z) Percent of state agriculture sales**

**Share of Sales by Type (%)**

Crops	8
Livestock, poultry, and products	92

**Land in Farms by Use (%) <sup>a</sup>**

Cropland	31
Pastureland	32
Woodland	32
Other	4

**Acres irrigated: 76**

(Z)% of land in farms

**Land Use Practices (% of farms)**

No till	9
Reduced till	5
Intensive till	5
Cover crop	8

Local Foods Circulated within the County to County Residents

Further, only 9% of farms sell directly to the consumer. This says a lot about capacity in the local circulation of local foods. In 2018 the Rutherford County Farmers Market was a great success, selling out often. Approximately 780 people were customers at the farmer's market. This is an amazing accomplishment for Rutherford County,

as the farmer’s market had not been as successful in years past. However, it is worth noting that of the 66,701 residents in Rutherford County, less than 1,000 of those people are currently able to purchase local foods, solely considering capacity.  
(2017 Census of Agriculture, 2019)

Farmer’s Market

Number of vendors selling meat, dairy, or produce	21
Range of shoppers in 2018 (highest to lowest)	213-736

Farms with Direct to Consumer Sales

Rutherfordton (7)	Bostic (2)	Lake Lure (2)	Ellenboro (1)	Forest City (1)	Union Mills (1)
-All Natural Farms -C-Saw Hill Farms -Flip-Flop Farms -Handscrabble Hollow Farm -Jones Family Farm -Maple Creek Farm -Past Ur Time Farm	-A Way of Life Farm -Belflower Farm	-Deer Valley Farm -Pangaea Plants LLC.	-Aunt Wendy’s Kitchen	-Under the Sun Farms	Darby Farms

Other farms whose locations were not found:

- Tipton’s Garden
- Whippoorwill Farm
- White House Farm

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

A Way of Life Farms, Bostic, NC

Offerings: Up to 33 weeks of fresh certified organic produce for spring, summer, and fall, and optional pork shares. Beans, beets, blueberries, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, garlic, ginger, herbs, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce, onions, peppers, potatoes, salad

mix, spinach, strawberries, summer squash, sweet potatoes, swiss chard, tomatoes, turmeric, turnips, watermelon, zucchini, and more.

Jones Family Farm, Rutherfordton/Gilkey, NC

Offerings: greens, radishes, arugula, lettuce, turnips, kohlrabi, varieties of cabbage, scallions, onions, broccoli, green peas, beets, swiss chard, carrots, green beans, spinach, cucumbers, peppers, pumpkins, cantaloupes, watermelons, winter squash, summer squash, sweet corn, popcorn, tomatoes, okra, potatoes, sweet potatoes, field peas, strawberries, blueberries, scuppernongs, garlic, pork, eggs

**Food Pantries**

It is unknown exactly how many Rutherford County residents are served by pantries. One can suppose that if approximately 22,678 people are experiencing food insecurity, that many of those people are accessing food from food pantries. There are nine major operating food pantries in Rutherford County. Each have different ways of sourcing food, and systems and policies for how pantry recipients can access the pantry.

28043	Forest City	Chase Corner Ministries Graham Town Community
28160	Spindale	Yokefellow Adaville Baptist Church Stainless Ministries
28018	Bostic	Washburn Community Outreach
28114 (a Cleveland County zip code, but straddles Rutherford County and serves Rutherford County residents)	Henrietta	B.A.S.I.C Ministries
28139	Gilkey	Neighbor’s Pantry
28746	Lake Lure	Hickory Nut Gorge Outreach

## Chapter Two

### Community Input: Forums and Surveys

#### **Forums**

Two sets of community forums were conducted throughout 2018-2019. The first forum was conducted in July 2018 with The Welcome Table, a free community meal held at United Methodist Church Rutherfordton every Monday, and NetworX, a long-term mentorship program that helps people take steps to undo cyclical poverty.

The second set of forums were done during the months of March and April of 2019. Representatives from the Rutherford-Polk-McDowell Health District and the Rutherford Food Network met with residents from five Rutherford County communities to share dialogue regarding access to fresh, healthy foods in Rutherford County. These forums were meant to work in conjunction with official data, to tell the fuller story of how Rutherford County residents are accessing healthy foods and how such access impacts resident's health.

#### **The Welcome Table & NetworX**

Among the 32 participants, there was a clear message that they want more access to fresh food.

Members in every focus group expressed their desire for access to fresh produce from the Farmer's Market or from gardens. One woman's story was particularly poignant:

*"I would rather sit down to a table that has salads and squash and a cut of lean meat. But, the stuff you get at the food pantries can be really unhealthy, like bread, cupcakes, cookies, and a bunch of all the same thing in cans. The fresh stuff can be almost rotten. If this is what you have, this is what you are going to eat. I cannot afford to go to grocery stores or the farmers market. My son is almost 300 lbs, and I would like to feed him better, but I have nothing else to feed him."*

Every focus group reflected on community gardens with enthusiasm. The conversations brought out stories of their own gardening skills and past experiences.

*"We had gardens when we lived in the country, we put out enough to feed fifty families. We canned and froze stuff all the time. I had a 30x40 garden with squash, beans -- more than we could use. We enjoyed giving it away."*

*"My dad used to grow greens for everyone when I was young."*

*"My sister grew potatoes in a barrel this year"*

*“Oh yes. I grew up cooking and canning. I like to cook -- and I would like to learn how to cook healthier.”*

Network participants expressed an interest in a community garden as a service project.

People help each other.

*“We have a car, so we help other people. We pick up food [from the pantries] to help out people where we live. We cook for them too.”*

*“Other people help us out. My friends keep me supplied in bags of flour, crisco, and beans”*

Although, the cultural messages about the “deserving poor” are here too:

*“I’m okay with putting in the work of gardening and sharing the produce, if people really do need it. We don’t want to do the work to have someone else come in and get it.”*

There are Real Challenges to Accessing Healthy Food

**Cost:** Some of the participants said they don’t go to grocery stores, which they said were too expensive. Price was the issue with the farmer's market, too, and “not everyone accepts the vouchers.”

**Transportation:**

*“It’s hard to get healthy foods, to get to all these places. The hard part is getting to them, on the day it is available.”*

**Not having access to local grown foods** -- either through friends, community gardens, or farms. Limitations to growing it themselves included health and mobility issues, or not having land or equipment.

Reflections on Community Resources

A typical eco-map putting a family seeking healthy food at the center will look a little different with the input of those experiencing a lack of access to healthy foods. These community members added another \_\_\_ resources to our starting list.

Other comments about resources

- **Gilke and Welcome Table** – we’d starve without them
- **Backpack program** REALLY helps
  - Food and toiletry giveaways during Thanksgiving which helps with getting through the holidays

- mom who was presenting is happy with what her son's **daycare** feeds him
- **Grahamtown Garden** gives away a lot of food
- **Fagin farms** accepts EBT
- **Senior Center** -- valuable community asset; consider for partnership
- "I would take the gardens and **community gardens**, and some meat, and that's all I need.
- Grocery stores are too expensive for some people; **Aldi's** stood out among grocery store
- Used to have a truck that delivered a bunch of produce, doesn't come around anymore

Nobody recognized cooperative extension, only one person knew about Grahamtown community garden

### Rutherford County Assessment Forums

Each forum was held in a different zip code to demonstrate any differences that may be present in food access across the county.

Towns visited were:

- Bostic, Salem United Methodist Church, 15 in attendance
- Caroleen, Caroleen United Methodist Church, 14 in attendance
- Bills Creek, Fairfield Mountains Church, 1 in attendance
- Rutherfordton, Woodrow Wilson Building, 1 in attendance
- Forest City, Circle of Parents, 8 in attendance

Forum questions revolved around themes, not specific questions so communities could more freely discuss their thoughts on topics that felt most important to them. Questions revolved around the following:

- What do people eat and why, where do they purchase it, and where do they eat it?
- What does the term "healthy food" mean?
- What are any challenges that arise when it comes to eating healthy?
- What are some things that would make eating healthy in Rutherford County easier?

### Key Themes Present within Each Forum

Diets seemed to be relatively diverse: a mix of traditional Appalachian foods like biscuits, green beans, ham; deep south foods like low country boils, Jamaican food, Chinese/Japanese food, Mexican food, etc. Something that was true for all of them was that many eat at home as often. There is an understanding of the downfall of eating processed foods. Every forum mentioned the desire to eat as many whole foods as possible, though it's not always easy. Similarly, there were many forums in which people expressed the harmful nature of preservatives.

What does the term "healthy" mean?

Across forums this question also followed with similar answers. The overwhelming consensus was, "no processed foods, whole foods, well-balanced, fresh unprocessed foods, fruits and vegetables, low carb/low fat.

Key Themes as were Most Important to specific Towns Challenges

### *Forest City*

- Not many places to eat out and eat healthy
- Not enough variety of healthy food
- Apathy
- Convenience and comfort
- Pantries could be better
- It's easier to eat unhealthy foods because of the convenience and comfort

### *Rutherfordton*

- Whole county is a food desert
- Mills shutting down made Rutherford County economically depressed--very limited and specific workforce--no one stays in county
- Ingles has no competition
- One farmer's market for almost 70,000 people

### *Bills Creek*

- Transportation
- A lack of decent paying year-round jobs
- Cost burdened households with rent/mortgage and a high water bill implied to whole area healthy food is expensive
- Unhealthy food not only addictive but also very cheap
- Some people have to prioritize calorically dense foods over necessarily healthy ones
- Some people have difficulty buying food, period, let alone fresh foods

### *Caroleen*

- Lack of time
- Perception of that healthy food is expensive
- Disconnect in flow of information
- Poor quality food at schools

### *Bostic*

- Time to cook at home--the perception of not having v.s. Making time
- Lack of "quality" food in stores in Bostic
- Lack of transportation
- Food is at bottom of spending list
- Motel living situations (mini-fridge and microwave)
- Empathy building
- Awareness gap

## Solutions

### *Forest City*

- More variety of healthy foods
- Easier access to healthy foods

- More ethnic foods in grocery stores
- Community would support each other
- food pantries offer fresher
- healthier foods

*Rutherfordton*

- Community gardens
- Winter market
- Market that doesn't compete with others
- Better quality food at pantries and backpack program
- Baby steps

*Caroleen*

- More circulation of resources and knowledge of resources

*Bostic*

- Empathy building so community can be there for each other
- Capacity building for families to grow food at home and cook at home
- Easy and convenient access to fresh and affordable foods
- Community gardening projects

**Surveys**

Surveys were given to various populations across the county during the years 2018 and 2019. Of such were recipients of Chase Corner Ministry, WIC, and the backpack program.

Backpack Program and Chase Corner Ministry

In this survey we asked participants what their relationship to fresh healthy foods looked like and where they get it/would get it if it were available. More than half, if not most, recipients responded to the survey with a general practice of healthy eating. Many, sometimes most, people said they eat produce at least most of the time and cook healthy meals at home most of the time. Not all, but many grow at least some food at home and almost all are open to the farmer's market, as well as roadside markets that sell fresh produce. The responses in surveys were all receptive to healthy foods. There was much enthusiasm for farmer's markets and community gardens.

WIC

Similarly to the Backpack program and Chase Ministry surveys, participants were eager to eat fresh, healthy foods and due to the capacity they can afford. In this survey, participants were asked more specific questions about what motivates eating choices and purchasing habits. Some mentioned high rent/mortgage, or cooking meals for kids as well as adults.

## Chapter Three

### Recommendations

1. Active prioritization of greater access to healthy foods from elected officials  
The health of Rutherford County residents needs to be supported by elected officials and other government and financial powers. If structural support is not there, many efforts may fall short of their full potential, depending on the project. With government investment in the furthering of health for Rutherford County, there may be a chance at government financial investment in such places. If this assessment were exhaustive, a question it would address is, “Where is government support,” Understanding where or if there is an important next step.
2. Cultural normalization and demystification of healthy eating Generally speaking, many Americans spend a tremendous amount of effort unlearning unhealthy eating habits and integrating healthy ones. Though participants in surveys and community forums have expressed that they value and actively try to participate in healthy eating, statistics share a different side of this narrative. If most people are not at a healthy weight, they may also be vulnerable to diet-related illnesses. A significant and consistent presence of enjoyable healthy foods within local retail spaces, restaurants, and other public institutions would offer an experience of food alternative to the mainstream. (Explain a little more.)
3. Healthier foods in restaurants  
Eating out is an important part of life for many Rutherford County residents. As we’ve learned from forums and surveys, convenience and time-efficiency is a number one factor of accessing healthy foods. For many people, part of this is eating out. There are some whose only preference is to eat out. Influencing and supporting restaurants in creating more healthy meals in their restaurants will be a huge support for residents. In some forums attendees shared that they often go outside of the county to eat at a healthy restaurant. Creating a food culture within Rutherford County that supports healthy eating would help to keep residents inside the county, and keep dollars inside the county as well.
4. Community, backyard, and neighborhood gardens  
Participants in forums and surveys expressed that they would participate in community gardens. Many shared that they thought this would be a great opportunity to spend time with their children and learn a new skill. There are some community gardens in Rutherford County with various structures: Grahamtown Community Garden and The Little Garden that Grew. An upcoming community garden is also being planned at the hospital in Rutherfordton. Further investment in these projects and the support of others across the county would be beneficial.  
A wonderful example is The Grahamtown Team’s work with their community in building backyard gardens for people who sign up. The Grahamtown Team purchases the materials needed to make a garden bed, supplies the soil and the seeds, and builds and plants the garden.  
Providing the tools to support these efforts such as a free seed bank or help with getting a garden started would provide further support for residents.

In the forum conducted with The Welcome Table, an attendee shared that her and her son are hardly ever able to afford fresh fruits and vegetables, but that she would love to be able to eat them. She was very excited about the thought of participating in a community garden for this reason.

5. Information circulation regarding local resources like CSAs, the Farmer's market, community gardens, etc.

A trend at almost each forum was a lack of knowledge about what resources were available within the county. Many did not know what Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is or where to find information about how to participate. Collecting this information and providing it in one well-known place would be supportive for people who are searching for ways to expand their healthy eating practice. Ex: a booklet of information about where to eat a healthy/local meal, where to find a community garden and the farmer's market, where one can sign up to participate in CSA, and healthy recipes.

6. Greater access to healthy foods outside of the central region of the county

Forest City, Spindale, and Rutherfordton have the most food retail venues and restaurants. Widening and diversifying the distribution of healthy foods to other parts of the county would decrease food insecurity in places outside of this central area, as well as make it more convenient for such populations to purchase healthy foods. Examples are a mobile farmer's market, pop-up markets at schools or community centers (Cliffside Elementary was open to a weekly visit from the GRO Bus—mobile farmer's market—when it was in service), or establishing farmer's markets in these areas.

7. Further support for new farmers and general capacity building for local foods

One forum participant reflected that there are almost 70,000 residents in Rutherford County and one farmer's market. In 2018, the farmer's market sold out regularly. This incredible outcome also demonstrates the current capacity for local foods within Rutherford County. If only 9% of Rutherford County farmers are selling direct to consumer, most people who live in Rutherford County won't be able to eat a local diet simply because there is not enough food being grown with the intent to sell locally to support it. Therefore, capacity building would make it possible for more people in Rutherford County to eat local, as well as serve local foods in places like schools, hospitals, and restaurants. Most of the farm land in Rutherford County is used for meat and grains. Finding ways to dedicate more land to local produce and local meats would push this forward. Further, supplying support for new and growing farmers is essential. An example is offering classes to growers about how to work with school systems, historians, and restaurants in providing local food, as well as offering financial support for GAP certification. Funds for this could be sourced through grants.

8. Better understanding of food and health among community leaders and service providers

It is important for community leaders to have a good relationship with health and be part of supporting initiatives that involve healthy foods. Church leaders, doctors, nurses, and the like are important figures in the community who have voices and positions that are

impactful. To be well educated about the impact diet has on health would help further this cause.

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