

The Dual Crisis of Food Wastage and Food Insecurity in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan Area

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the dual challenges of food waste and food insecurity within the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area, one of the fastest-growing urban regions in the United States. The study aims to identify the scale, sources, and consequences of food waste and food insecurity in DFW, as well as the systemic links that connect these issues. Utilizing data from national sources such as the USDA, ReFED, and Feeding America, alongside regional reports from the North Central Texas Council of Governments and local nonprofits, the research analyzes food waste generation by sector and maps rates of food insecurity across key counties in the region. The findings reveal a paradox: while millions of pounds of edible food are discarded annually—much of it by restaurants and institutions—1 in 7 residents within the DFW area remains food insecure, with children, seniors, and minority communities being disproportionately affected. The paper identifies logistical and policy barriers that hinder the redirection of surplus food, including inadequate infrastructure for food recovery, liability concerns, and lack of coordination between stakeholders. Despite these challenges, the study highlights innovative solutions currently being implemented, such as composting programs at DFW Airport, nonprofit food rescue efforts, and apps like Too Good To Go. The research concludes by advocating for a multi-sectoral approach that includes policy reform, expanded food recovery infrastructure, and public education. Strengthening partnerships between governments, businesses, nonprofits, and communities is essential to creating a more equitable and sustainable local food system. This paper contributes to broader discussions on urban resilience, food justice, and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Food Insecurity, Food Waste, Dallas-Fort Worth, Urban Sustainability, Food Systems

THE DUAL CRISIS OF FOOD WASTAGE AND FOOD INSECURITY

The Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area, a vibrant and rapidly growing urban center, grapples with a significant paradox: substantial quantities of food are wasted daily while a considerable portion of its population experiences food insecurity.¹ This juxtaposition of surplus and scarcity highlights a critical challenge in the region's food system, mirroring a global issue where an estimated one billion meals are wasted each day while over 700 million people face hunger.¹ This disconnect signifies not only an inefficient allocation of resources but also raises ethical concerns about the squandering of sustenance when basic needs are unmet. In the United States, this problem is similarly pronounced, with a large percentage of the food supply going unsold or uneaten, leading to significant environmental and social consequences.² Understanding the intricacies of food wastage and food insecurity within the specific context of the DFW area is essential to developing effective strategies for mitigation and ensuring a more equitable and sustainable food system for all its residents. This research paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these interconnected issues in the DFW metropolitan area, contextualizing them within the national landscape, exploring their broader implications, and considering potential pathways toward meaningful solutions.

NATIONAL OVERVIEW: THE SCOPE OF FOOD WASTE AND FOOD INSECURITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Across the United States, the issue of food waste has reached alarming proportions, with estimates indicating that between 30 and 40 percent of the entire food supply is discarded annually.³ This staggering figure translates to approximately 92 billion pounds of food and an economic loss exceeding \$473 billion each year.⁶ The pervasiveness of this waste occurs across all stages of the food system, from farms to households.² Notably, residential households emerge as a primary source, contributing over half of the total food waste generated nationwide.⁷ This highlights the critical role of consumer behavior and awareness in addressing this problem. The foodservice sector, including restaurants and institutional food providers, also contributes significantly, accounting for roughly 23 percent of the food waste in Texas alone.⁷ Furthermore, sectors such as manufacturing (13 percent) and retail (6 percent) also add to the overall waste stream in Texas, demonstrating that food loss and waste are pervasive issues throughout the supply chain, even extending to the agricultural level where nearly 5 percent of food is wasted.⁷

Concurrently, the United States faces a significant challenge with food insecurity, defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Millions of individuals across the nation experience this hardship, with rates showing an upward trend in recent years.¹² This increase suggests a growing vulnerability within the population, potentially linked to economic instability and changes in social safety net programs. Food insecurity disproportionately affects certain demographic groups, including households with children, single-parent households, and racial and ethnic minorities such as Black and Hispanic households.¹³ These disparities point to systemic inequalities that exacerbate food access challenges. Key contributing factors to food insecurity include poverty, unemployment, and the increasing cost of food.¹⁵ Inflation, particularly in food prices, further strains the budgets of low-income households, making it difficult to afford nutritious meals.²⁰

Understanding the national landscape of food waste and food insecurity is crucial for contextualizing the situation in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Reports such as the 2025 ReFED U.S. Food Waste Report provide comprehensive data, including charts and graphs, on national food waste across various sectors, its destinations, and its economic value.⁸ These resources offer critical insights into the scale and nature of the problem at a national level. Similarly, the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) offers key statistics and graphics on food security in the U.S., tracking trends and providing breakdowns by household characteristics.¹³ Feeding America's "Map the Meal Gap" tool provides interactive visualizations of food insecurity rates and numbers at various geographic levels.¹⁹ Additionally, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) compiles data on food waste generation and management pathways, offering a comprehensive view of how food waste is handled nationwide.²³ These national data sources collectively paint a picture of a food system grappling with significant inefficiencies and inequities. The sheer magnitude of food waste, coupled with the rising rates of food insecurity among vulnerable populations, underscores the urgent need for effective and comprehensive solutions at both the national and local levels. The fact that the U.S. government has set a goal to reduce food waste by 50 percent by 2030² further emphasizes the national commitment to addressing this critical issue.

THE DALLAS-FORT WORTH METROPOLITAN AREA: A CLOSER LOOK AT FOOD WASTE

Within the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area, the issue of food waste mirrors the national trend, with a substantial amount of organic material entering the waste stream. In the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) region, which encompasses the DFW area and surrounding counties, wasted organics account for approximately 30 percent of all generated waste.²⁵ This significant percentage translates to an estimated 2.8 million tons of wasted organics per year across the 16-county region, highlighting the immense scale of the challenge in North Texas.²⁵ Of this amount, a considerable portion comes from non-residential sources, with an estimated 405,000 net tons of food residuals being landfilled annually in the NCTCOG region.²⁵ Restaurants emerge as a major contributor to this commercial food waste, accounting for 60 percent of the low-

end and 24 percent of the high-end estimates of food residuals generated in the region.²⁵ This signifies the critical need for targeted interventions and policies aimed at reducing food waste within the restaurant sector in DFW.

Despite the scale of the problem, the DFW area is witnessing a growing number of corporate partnerships and initiatives focused on mitigating food waste. Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, for instance, has implemented a successful composting program for its terminal restaurants, diverting 60 tons of food waste from landfills in just ten months.²⁶ This initiative, in partnership with Turn Compost, a Dallas-based company, demonstrates the viability of public-private collaborations in addressing food waste in large commercial settings.²⁶ Recycle Revolution also plays a crucial role by offering commercial food waste collection services across DFW, diverting over 150 tons of organic material from landfills each month.²⁸ Similarly, Moonshot Compost provides commercial composting services to businesses in both Dallas and Fort Worth, offering tailored plans and detailed reporting on waste diversion.³⁰ An innovative approach to reducing food waste at the retail level is exemplified by the Too Good To Go app, which partners with over 500 restaurants and stores across Texas, including many in DFW, to sell their surplus food at discounted prices to consumers.³² This platform not only helps businesses recover some value from food that would otherwise be wasted but also offers affordable meal options to the community. Furthermore, non-profit organizations like Meals with Meaning are actively involved in rescuing surplus food from local restaurants and transforming it into nourishing meals for individuals in need, serving over 600 meals weekly.³⁶

The DFW area also features a developing food waste management infrastructure and various programs aimed at diverting organics from landfills. The City of Fort Worth has established a residential food waste composting program that has garnered significant participation, with over 2,400 subscribers collectively diverting substantial amounts of food waste.³⁷ While Dallas does not currently have a city-wide residential collection program, it provides resources and information to residents on how to reduce food waste, including guidance on composting.³⁹ Additionally, private services like Compost Carpool offer convenient at-home compost pickup for residents in Fort Worth.⁴² On a larger scale, companies such as Denali Corp provide comprehensive organic recycling services, including the conversion of food waste into valuable resources like animal feed and fertilizer.⁴³ These various initiatives and services represent a growing ecosystem dedicated to addressing food waste in the DFW metropolitan area.

THE DALLAS-FORT WORTH METROPOLITAN AREA: UNDERSTANDING FOOD INSECURITY

The Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area faces a significant challenge with food insecurity, mirroring the concerning trends observed at the state and national levels. Texas, unfortunately, leads the nation in food insecurity, and the DFW metroplex is home to a substantial number of individuals struggling with hunger.⁴⁴ Within the 13-county service area of the North Texas Food Bank (NTFB), which includes the DFW region, approximately 1 in 7 people experience food insecurity.⁴⁴ Dallas County bears a particularly heavy burden, accounting for 52% of the food-insecure population within the NTFB service area.⁴⁶ Tarrant County also faces a considerable challenge, with an 18.1% food insecurity rate affecting over 340,000 residents.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Denton County has a significant number of food-insecure individuals, with over 114,000 people experiencing hunger⁴⁵, and the rate of food insecurity in the county saw a notable increase between 2021 and 2022.⁴⁵

Food insecurity in the DFW area disproportionately affects certain demographic groups. Children are particularly vulnerable, with nearly 40% of the food-insecure population being under the age of 18.⁴⁵ Racial and ethnic minorities also experience higher rates of food insecurity, with Black and Hispanic individuals in the NTFB service area facing significantly greater challenges compared to their White counterparts.⁴⁶ Seniors in the DFW area are also at risk, with Texas ranking among the top states for senior hunger.⁴⁵

The scale of food insecurity in the DFW area is further underscored by the substantial meal gap within the NTFB service area, estimated at over 146 million meals annually.⁴⁶ This represents the total number of meals needed to

meet the nutritional needs of the food-insecure population in the region. The estimated cost per meal for these individuals is approximately \$3.83, highlighting the financial barriers they face in accessing adequate food.⁴⁶

THE NEXUS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FOOD WASTE AND FOOD INSECURITY

The relationship between food waste and food insecurity is a critical aspect of understanding the challenges faced by the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area. A significant connection lies in the fact that wholesome food, which is currently wasted, has the potential to help feed families in need.⁶⁹ The sheer volume of food that is discarded annually, both nationally and within the DFW region, represents a missed opportunity to alleviate hunger. Inefficient food systems are at the root of both food waste and food insecurity.² Systemic flaws in how food is produced, distributed, and consumed contribute to both the loss of edible food and the lack of access to sufficient nutrition for a significant portion of the population.

Food recovery and redistribution efforts play a vital role in addressing this nexus. Organizations in the DFW area, such as Rescuing Leftover Cuisine (RLC) in Dallas, actively work to rescue edible food from businesses like restaurants and deliver it to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity.⁷² RLC Dallas has successfully rescued hundreds of thousands of pounds of food, providing hundreds of thousands of meals to those in need. Foodsource DFW also plays a critical role by helping businesses facilitate large-scale donations of their surplus food, ensuring that resources that would otherwise go to waste are directed to food banks and other organizations serving the hungry.⁷³ Furthermore, initiatives like the Harvest Project Food Rescue in Dallas focus on distributing fresh produce that has been rescued from waste streams to food-insecure residents, particularly in areas identified as food deserts.⁷⁵

Despite these efforts, there are significant logistical and policy challenges in fully bridging the gap between food waste and food insecurity. Food safety regulations and concerns about liability can sometimes deter businesses from donating surplus food, even when it is perfectly edible.⁷² Clear and supportive policies are needed to encourage food donation while ensuring safety. Additionally, the lack of adequate infrastructure for large-scale food recovery and redistribution, including transportation, storage facilities, and a sufficient network of volunteers, can limit the reach and impact of food rescue initiatives. Improved coordination between potential food donors and food assistance organizations is also crucial to ensure that donated food is efficiently and effectively directed to those who need it most. The fact that many landfills in the DFW area, such as the McCommas Bluff Landfill in Dallas, are located in food-insecure communities⁷⁵ starkly illustrates the systemic disconnect between where food waste is generated and where it could potentially be used to address hunger, highlighting an area where local policy interventions could be particularly impactful.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND RELATED ISSUES

The issues of food waste and food insecurity in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area extend beyond mere resource mismanagement and hunger; they carry significant environmental and economic implications. Food waste in landfills is a major source of methane emissions, a potent greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change.¹ By diverting food waste through composting and other methods, the DFW area can reduce its environmental footprint and help mitigate the impacts of climate change. Furthermore, food waste places a substantial burden on landfill capacity²⁵, and initiatives aimed at reducing the amount of organic material entering landfills, such as Fort Worth's residential composting program and DFW Airport's efforts, are crucial for extending the lifespan of existing landfills and avoiding the need for new ones.²⁶ The production of food that ultimately goes to waste also represents a significant squandering of valuable resources, including water, land, and energy.⁶ Reducing food waste, therefore, contributes to the conservation of these essential resources.

Food insecurity, on the other hand, carries considerable economic costs for the DFW area. Hunger and malnutrition can lead to poor academic performance and increased health problems, which can have long-term impacts on individuals' economic potential and the overall productivity of the region.⁶⁰ Families struggling with food insecurity often face difficult choices between meeting their basic needs, including food, housing, and

healthcare⁵⁰, which can perpetuate a cycle of poverty. Food banks in the DFW area, which play a critical role in addressing food insecurity, often face funding shortfalls, particularly in the wake of federal budget cuts, which limit their ability to meet the growing demand for assistance.⁶⁶ Given that Texas leads the nation in the number of people experiencing hunger, the economic implications for the state and its major metropolitan areas like DFW are substantial.⁴⁴

The policy landscape in the DFW area reflects a growing awareness of these issues. Both Fort Worth and Dallas have incorporated food waste reduction into their long-term sustainability plans.³⁹ While Fort Worth has implemented a residential composting program, Dallas is exploring various strategies to address food waste. State-level policies, such as date labeling requirements, also have implications for food waste management.⁹⁰ Organizations like the North Texas Food Bank actively advocate for state policies that support anti-hunger initiatives, including streamlining access to SNAP benefits and implementing programs like Summer EBT.⁴⁴ Community-based solutions and corporate engagement are also vital components of the response to food waste and food insecurity in DFW. Partnerships between educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and corporations, such as the collaboration between Tarleton State University Fort Worth and MW Cares Foundation to open a food pantry⁹², and the numerous corporate partners supporting the North Texas Food Bank⁹³, demonstrate the power of collective action. Local initiatives like Hunger Busters, which provides meals to students⁹⁴, and the Tarrant Area Food Bank's collaborations⁹⁵, highlight the strong community commitment to addressing these challenges. The partnership between the Fort Worth Botanic Garden and Union Gospel Mission to grow food for those in need provides an inspiring example of a local, sustainable solution.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis presented in this report underscores the significant and interconnected challenges of food wastage and food insecurity within the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area. Situated within a state that leads the nation in hunger, DFW grapples with substantial levels of both food waste across various sectors and food insecurity affecting a considerable portion of its population, particularly children, minorities, and seniors. The national context reveals that these issues are not unique to DFW but are symptomatic of broader inefficiencies and inequities within the U.S. food system.

Systemic factors drive both food waste and food insecurity in the DFW area. Inefficient food production, distribution, and consumption patterns contribute to the large volumes of wasted food. Economic disparities, including lower wages, rising living costs, and limited access to affordable and nutritious food, are key drivers of food insecurity. Furthermore, policy decisions and the availability of infrastructure for food waste diversion and food assistance programs play crucial roles in shaping the landscape of these challenges. The presence of food deserts, particularly in low-income and minority communities, further exacerbates the problem of food insecurity, often existing in close proximity to sources of significant food waste.

Addressing these complex issues requires a multi-layered approach involving coordinated efforts from policymakers, businesses, non-profit organizations, and the community at large. Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate food waste and alleviate food insecurity in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area:

Enhance Food Waste Reduction and Recovery Infrastructure:

- **Policymakers:** Implement policies that incentivize or mandate food waste diversion from landfills for commercial entities, such as restaurants, grocery stores, and institutions, potentially following the model of cities like Austin.⁹⁰ Explore the feasibility of establishing city-wide residential food waste collection programs in both Dallas and Fort Worth, building on the success of Fort Worth's pilot program.³⁷
- **Businesses:** Increase participation in food rescue programs like Rescuing Leftover Cuisine and Foodsource DFW.⁷² Utilize apps like Too Good To Go to reduce food waste at the retail level.³² Explore partnerships with composting services like Moonshot Compost and Recycle Revolution.²⁸

- **Non-profit Organizations:** Expand food recovery and redistribution networks to reach more businesses and food-insecure individuals. Invest in infrastructure, such as refrigerated transportation and storage, to handle larger volumes of rescued food.
- **Community:** Promote consumer awareness campaigns to educate residents on strategies for reducing food waste at home, including meal planning, proper food storage, and understanding date labels.⁷ Encourage participation in residential composting programs where available and support community composting initiatives.³⁷

Strengthen Food Security Initiatives and Address Root Causes:

- **Policymakers:** Advocate for and support policies at the state and federal levels that strengthen SNAP benefits, expand eligibility for food assistance programs, and address the SNAP application backlog.⁴⁴ Support the implementation of programs like Summer EBT to combat child hunger.⁴⁴ Invest in initiatives that address the root causes of food insecurity, such as affordable housing, job training, and living wage policies.⁴⁴
- **Non-profit Organizations:** Continue to expand food distribution programs, including mobile pantries and school-based initiatives, to reach underserved communities.¹⁰² Enhance efforts to connect food-insecure individuals with other essential resources, such as healthcare, housing assistance, and job support.⁴⁴
- **Corporate Partnerships:** Encourage businesses to partner with food banks and other hunger relief organizations through financial contributions, food donations, and employee volunteer programs.⁹³ Support initiatives that provide access to healthy food in underserved communities, such as Bonton Farms' grocery delivery program.¹¹²
- **Community:** Support local food banks and food pantries through donations of food, time, and money.⁶⁷ Participate in community gardens and urban agriculture initiatives to increase access to fresh produce in food deserts.⁷⁵

By implementing these recommendations through collaborative and sustained efforts, the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area can make significant strides in reducing food waste, alleviating food insecurity, and building a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable food system for all its residents.

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