



WHAT THE REPORT IS ABOUT

This report examines the community food system in the Denver neighborhoods of Globeville, Elyria, and Swansea (GES). Through interviews, focus groups, community observations, and engagement with residents and organizations, the report explores how households experience food access, the strategies communities use to navigate barriers, opportunities to strengthen the local food system and makes a number of recommendations for organizations and institutions working with GES and similar communities.

The findings show that food access in GES is shaped by a range of issues. Housing costs, transportation barriers, environmental concerns, limited grocery store access, unstable employment, and caregiving responsibilities all influence how families obtain and use food. Despite these challenges, residents and organizations actively sustain a vibrant, community-driven food system through food production sites, distribution programs, informal food networks, and cultural food traditions.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

GES are among Denver's oldest neighborhoods, originally established in the late 1800s as working-class industrial communities. Today, roughly 10,500 people call GES home, with over 80% identifying as Black, Native American, or Hispanic, and within Elyria and Swansea specifically, more than 75% of residents are of Hispanic or Latino origin. The area faces significant socioeconomic challenges: median household income sits around \$63,000 (below Denver's ~\$70,000 citywide median), roughly 57% of the working population holds a high school diploma or less, and about 40% of households spend 30% or more of their income on housing. These pressures are compounded by a long history of environmental challenges and structural issues like redlining that continue to shape daily life.

With food access specifically, GES is classified as a food desert: at least 33% of residents live more than a mile from the nearest supermarket, requiring an average 30-minute walk compared to the 10-minute norm for most Denver residents. Broader data from a recent City of Denver survey found that about 40% of District 9 residents reported cutting or skipping meals due to lack of food, placing the district fourth place on food security vulnerability across Denver's eleven council districts.

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~10,500**Residents in the GES community****80%+****Identify as non-white****40%****Spend 30%+ on housing****23%****Live below the poverty level****40%****District 9 residents cut meal sizes****30 min****Average walk to nearest grocery store**

METHODS

 Research Techniques	 Participants	 Sampling	 Analysis & Positionality
- Interviews and focus groups conducted Aug 2024-Dec 2025 - Participant observation - Secondary data analysis - Community workshop - Thematic coding (NVivo) - Member checking	97 total participants 21 community org reps 33 mothers & grandmothers 13 CSU Spur staff 30 Denver food system leaders - Bilingual (English & Spanish)	- Purposive and snowball sampling to include people with direct experience in the GES food system. - Community leaders selected for long-term involvement. Households reached through community events and word of mouth. - An initial workshop shaped recruitment priorities from the start and follow-up meetings helped validate findings.	- Interviews transcribed in original language guided by various community resources i.e. community capitals. - Lead researcher's identity as a Latina, Spanish-native speaker provided meaningful community access. - Team continually reflected on how CSU affiliation may have shaped responses.

KEY FINDINGS

 **Food access is shaped by interconnected factors**
Income, housing costs, transportation, and environmental conditions do not act in isolation, they compound one another in ways that make consistent food access difficult for many GES households.

 **Affordability, culture, and convenience all matter**
Food needs to be affordable, culturally appropriate, and easy to access within people's daily routines. Missing any one of these reduces the likelihood of household food security.

 **Community networks are essential infrastructure**
Community organizations and informal networks, from food distribution programs to neighbors sharing food, play key roles in helping people access food, often filling gaps that formal systems currently fail to.

 **Programs alone do not ensure food access**
Having food programs in place does not automatically result in food access or utilization. Barriers such as transportation, schedules, trust, and cultural misalignment limit who is actually reached.

 **Access to an affordable grocery store is a key gap**
The lack of a full-service, affordable grocery store within walking distance, combined with limited transportation options, makes it harder for residents to regularly access food.

 **Culturally responsive programs are more effective**
Food programs are more effective when they reflect people's culture, needs, and daily realities. Food that is unfamiliar or inaccessible, even if available, often goes unused.

 **Improving food access requires coordinated, systemic action**
Addressing food insecurity in GES requires coordinated efforts that go beyond food provisioning. Tackling root causes such as housing instability, low wages, and transportation gaps, while supporting and strengthening community-led work already underway.

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY

"The cost of living is so high that our community is working two jobs, barely making it. At the minimum wage, if you work 40 hours, you can't make it."

— GES Resident on the cost of living

"What we really believe at the core is that community control is really important... if you leave the solutions to people outside of the community, the solutions will never come."

— Community Leader on importance of community driven solutions

"I tried to grow. And I keep trying to grow my land — [but the] soil [is] full of lead and arsenic. I can't grow anything. The choices we have are minimal."

— GES Resident on environmental barriers to food production



BARRIERS AND ASSETS IN THE GES COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM

The GES community food system is shaped by a number of community resources i.e. capitals: natural and built, financial, political, and socio-cultural. These include the lack of a nearby affordable grocery store, transportation challenges, soil contamination, low and unstable income, limited trust in institutions, language barriers, and limited cultural alignment in existing programs. At the same time, the community holds real assets in each of these areas, including community gardens, informal food networks, active organizations, strong cultural food traditions, and growing interest in local food production. The figure below maps these barriers and assets side by side, showing where challenges persist and where community strengths offer a foundation for investment and action.

✓ ASSETS	⚠ BARRIERS
Financial Capital	
• Informal food economy (e.g. home-based food sales) • Existing workforce programs and support organizations • Household strategies to manage limited budgets • Community-based, informal economic activities	• Low and unstable income • High housing and living costs (e.g. food prices) • Limited access to formal business opportunities • Difficulty accessing funding for small or informal food businesses
Natural & Built Capital	
• Existing network of food access points (pantries, community fridges, school meal programs) • Community gardens and small-scale food production sites • Use of alternative growing methods (raised beds, greenhouses) • Community interest in expanding food production and access • Opportunities to invest in food infrastructure (markets, kitchens, greenhouses)	• Limited access to a nearby affordable grocery store • Transportation challenges (e.g. limited bus access, long travel times) • Inadequate infrastructure (e.g. sidewalks, covered bus stops, bike lanes) • Physical barriers within the neighborhood (e.g. highways, railroads, industrial areas) • Limited land for food production • Environmental degradation (soil contamination, air and water quality) • Limited storage, refrigeration, and food distribution infrastructure • Displacement, high housing prices, gentrification
Political Capital	
• Active community organizations and advocacy groups • Growing interest in community participation • Public and nonprofit actors engaged in food system work • Opportunities for cross-sector coordination	• Limited trust in institutions • Fragmented coordination across organizations and sectors • Few sources of funding
Socio-cultural & Human Capital	
• Cultural richness • Strong cooking, gardening, and food preparation skills • Strong family and community networks • Food sharing and mutual aid practices • Rich cultural food traditions and preferences • Community leadership emerging through local organizations	• Language barriers (limited English) • Time constraints due to work and caregiving responsibilities • Disconnection between neighborhoods (Globeville vs. Elyria-Swansea) • Uneven access to information and services • Limited cultural alignment in some programs

Improving food security in GES requires sustained, coordinated action that addresses structural conditions while supporting community-led systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented in this report are organized into five priority areas that reflect the interconnected nature of food access in GES: supporting basic household needs, building local leadership and skills, investing in food system infrastructure, strengthening trust and participation, and supporting research and innovation. This order is intentional, it begins with the foundational conditions that directly shape whether families can access food and builds toward longer-term changes. To support a range of actors, including community organizations, nonprofits, local government, academia, and the private sector, each area is divided into quick wins and stretch goals. Quick wins are actions that can be taken using existing resources, networks, and coordination, offering meaningful impact in the near term. Stretch goals require greater investment, new funding, and cross-sector alignment, but have the potential to address root causes and generate lasting change. Together, these recommendations are designed not as a checklist for any single institution, but as a shared framework for coordinated action, one that recognizes community-led efforts already underway and identifies where institutional support can make the most difference.

FOCUS AREA	 QUICK WINS	 STRETCH GOALS
1. Basic Household Needs	• Partner with food banks and pantries to expand culturally appropriate, affordable food options • Bundle food access with transportation vouchers, childcare stipends, and mental health referrals • Expand access to mental health and social work services within existing programs • Support initiatives that increase access to safe and affordable housing	• Develop cross-agency funding agreements (e.g. housing, food, transportation) for integrated service delivery • Support and lead efforts ensuring livable-wage employment opportunities • Provide childcare and dependent care services that allow households to participate in the job market • Invest in transportation options that make it easier to reach food and services
2. Local Leadership & Skills	• Offer bilingual, low-barrier workshops (evenings/weekends preferred) on food safety, small business basics, and licensing • Provide leadership, advocacy, and policy training focused on food systems (e.g. CSU Extension FLTI) • Provide education in food production: soil prep, composting, raised beds, seasonal planting • Offer workshops on how local government, food policy councils, and funding systems operate	• Develop low- or no-cost certification programs in food safety, preparation, and kitchen operations • Offer training in business management, marketing, and branding for food entrepreneurs • Train residents in grant writing, data collection, and program evaluation • Offer guidance on managing food pantries and markets, including volunteer coordination and emergency preparedness
3. Food System Infrastructure	• Strengthen coordination and funding for existing food access sites (e.g. pantries, community fridges, school programs) • Pilot greenhouse, hydroponic, or container-based growing projects using existing sites, and context appropriate methods • Support mobile markets or pop-up food distribution in underresourced areas of GES • Facilitate partnerships between organizations to share kitchen space and equipment • Provide small-scale upgrades to gardens (e.g. raised beds, composting, irrigation improvements)	• Develop a subsidized or low-cost grocery store model for GES (e.g. co-op, nonprofit, or public-private) • Establish a food business incubator with licensed commercial kitchens, training, and financing pathways • Build permanent infrastructure for food storage, processing, and distribution (e.g. food hubs, commissary kitchens) • Invest in vertical, hydroponic, or space-efficient growing systems adapted to GES land and soil constraints • Integrate food infrastructure planning with anti-displacement strategies
4. Trust & Participation	• Involve residents in planning, implementation, and evaluation of all food programs • Hire community navigators, or partner with existing programs, for outreach, education, and community feedback • Provide compensation (e.g. stipends, food, childcare) for community participation • Offer bilingual services and adjust schedules (evenings/weekends preferred) to match residents' availability • Clearly communicate program goals, timelines, and limitations to build transparency	• Establish and sustain community navigator teams as a formal part of food system outreach and engagement • Create and support community-led governance structures (e.g., neighborhood food committees) with real decision-making roles • Develop long-term funding to compensate community leadership and participation consistently • Align engagement strategies across organizations to reduce duplication and improve coordination • Integrate community participation into formal city-level policy and planning processes
5. Research & Innovation	• Partner with higher education and local organizations to conduct soil testing and share accessible guidance on safe growing • Integrate community input into nutrition programs to ensure they reflect daily realities and cultural preferences • Use existing programs (e.g. pantries, workshops) to gather feedback on barriers to food participation • Compile and share existing data on food access, transportation, and housing trends relevant to GES	• Expand culturally relevant, nutrition programs through ongoing community involvement and evaluation • Conduct research on anti-gentrification strategies tied to food system development, including housing and small business impacts • Develop and test policy tools that support community stability (e.g. local food business protections, land use strategies) • Develop cross-sector policy strategies connecting food access with housing, transportation, and livelihoods

Conclusion

Food insecurity in GES is not the result of a single gap. It is the product of overlapping factors that compound one another in daily life. Yet residents and organizations have not waited for outside solutions. Through food production sites, distribution programs, informal networks, and cultural food practices, the community actively sustains its own food system with limited resources and remarkable consistency. Improving food security in GES calls for sustained, coordinated action that addresses root causes such as housing instability, low wages, limited transportation, and environmental harm, while recognizing and strengthening the community-led systems already in place. Progress depends on institutions aligning resources with community priorities and committing to long-term partnerships.