

# MEMO

February 13, 2026

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## Executive Summary

Jewish Family Services of Greater Hartford (JFS Hartford) launched a multimethod study to better understand the scope and nature of kosher food insecurity in Connecticut's Jewish communities, and to use evidence to strengthen communal advocacy, improve access to kosher food, and inform funding strategies. This memo presents findings from a statewide survey of Jewish adults administered in September 2025, interviews with communal professionals conducted in June 2025, and an extrapolation of food insecurity prevalence in the Jewish community using public data.

Three overarching findings emerge:

1. **Food insecurity is a real and meaningful issue within Connecticut's Jewish population.** Approximately one in ten Jewish adults in Connecticut is estimated to experience food insecurity. One-quarter of opt-in survey respondents experienced marginal (13%) or low/very low (12%) food security in the last year.
2. **Food insecurity is strongly intertwined with broader financial precarity and life disruption.** Survey respondents experiencing food insecurity were far more likely than food-secure respondents to report difficulty paying for utilities, housing, and medical care, and to report that their financial situation had worsened in recent years.
3. **Food insecurity is unevenly distributed and shaped by structural barriers—including gaps in access to kosher food and underutilization of existing supports.** Elevated risk is concentrated among certain subpopulations, including households with children, older adults, Russian-speaking respondents, and people with a disability. At the same time, **many food-insecure respondents are not consistently accessing available supports.**

Based on these findings, we recommend that JFS Hartford and partners pursue a coordinated strategy that includes: (1) strengthening kosher food assistance capacity, (2) targeting outreach and programs to support the most vulnerable subgroups, (3) providing support to address household financial insecurity, and (4) advancing statewide coordination.

## Background and Context

JFS Hartford initiated this study in response to growing concern about food insecurity among Jewish households in Connecticut, particularly among those who seek to maintain kosher food practices. While food insecurity is widely recognized as a statewide and national challenge, less is known about how it manifests within Jewish communities or how religious food requirements shape both vulnerability and response.

For many Jews, keeping kosher is not simply a dietary preference; it is a religious and cultural practice tied to identity, dignity, and belonging. When kosher food is unaffordable or inaccessible, households may face not only nutritional hardship, but also social and religious compromise.

The goals of this study were to:

- Assess the prevalence of food insecurity among Connecticut Jews;
- Understand how food insecurity is experienced, particularly by kosher-keeping households;
- Examine the capacity and constraints of communal responses; and
- Identify implications for policy, advocacy, and practice

## Study Design and Data Sources

The findings presented here synthesize evidence from three complementary sources:

### 1. **Public data about the Jewish population and food insecurity in Connecticut**

Because publicly available food insecurity data do not identify Jewish households, we used a structured extrapolation process to estimate Jewish food insecurity rates by county/region that included:

1. identifying extant data about the association between food insecurity and demographic characteristics among Connecticut residents in general<sup>1</sup>
2. identifying separate, extant data about the demographic characteristics of the Jewish population in Connecticut that could be matched to data from Connecticut residents in general<sup>2</sup>
3. extrapolating rates of food insecurity among Jews by applying the association between food insecurity and demographic characteristics among Connecticut residents generally to the demographic characteristics of the Jewish population specifically

This approach offers an order-of-magnitude estimate to contextualize survey findings.

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<sup>1</sup> [CT Data Collaborative](#) surveys asked people whether there had been times in the past 12 months when they did not have enough money to buy food for themselves or their families. The data included rates of food insecurity by five different geographic regions, across seven age categories, as well as race and level of education.

<sup>2</sup> We turned to the [American Jewish Population Project](#) (AJPP) at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies to provide five county-level demographic data estimates of percentage of Jews in the same seven age categories and two education categories available for Connecticut generally. We also obtained the estimated percentage of Jews who are White/Non-Hispanic and the percentage of Jews who are Hispanic.

## 2. **Statewide survey of Jewish adults in Connecticut**

In September 2025, an opt-in survey distributed through kosher food pantries, synagogues, day schools, and other communal organizations captured the lived experiences of over 400 Connecticut residents. The survey asked about food insecurity alongside questions about kosher observance, economic precarity, and use of assistance programs. While not a probability sample (and therefore not allowing for reliable assertion about its representativeness) the survey provides direct insight into lived experiences across regions and subpopulations.

## 3. **Key informant interviews**

Eight interviews were conducted with staff members of Jewish Family Services of Greater Hartford, organizations that provide kosher food or serve constituents who seek kosher food, and individuals who represent different parts of the community, both geographically and religiously. These interviews explored the perceived scope of kosher food insecurity, operational and infrastructure challenges, the populations most affected by kosher food insecurity, as well as policy and funding priorities.

## Kosher-keeping Households

Keeping kosher is a common practice among survey respondents, though levels of observance vary across groups. Seven out of ten respondents report that they currently keep kosher in their home or have done so in the past, and an additional 12% say they sometimes keep kosher. Among those who do not keep kosher, most (68%) indicate that they are not interested in doing so, while the remainder cite barriers such as affordability and proximity.

For households that do keep kosher, standards vary but are generally stringent. Two-thirds (66%) report purchasing only food with a hechsher, and among them nearly half (47%) require certification from a nationally recognized Orthodox authority. Smaller proportions follow more selective practices, such as checking ingredients to avoid non-kosher products (17%) or refraining from mixing meat and dairy (6%) without requiring formal certification.

Kosher observance is strongly associated with denomination and Jewish connectedness. Nearly all Orthodox respondents (98%) report keeping kosher. Rates decline among other denominations: 68% of Conservative, 39% of Secular, and 11% of Reform respondents report keeping kosher. Similarly, 74% of those who feel strongly connected to the Jewish community keep kosher, compared to 33% of those who do not feel connected.

Household composition and geography further shape kosher practice. A larger proportion of households with children keep kosher (90%) compared to households without children (71%), and just over half (55%) of older adults report keeping kosher. Geographically, New Haven has the highest concentration of kosher-keeping households (91%), compared to 66% in Hartford.

## The Lived Experience of Food Insecurity among Connecticut Jews

An estimated **10.9% of Jewish adults in Connecticut experience food insecurity**. That equates to approximately 12,000 Jewish adults and an estimated 3,000 additional children who are food insecure.

Similarly, using the USDA’s definition and methodology, **25% of survey respondents experienced marginal or low/very low food security** in the last year.

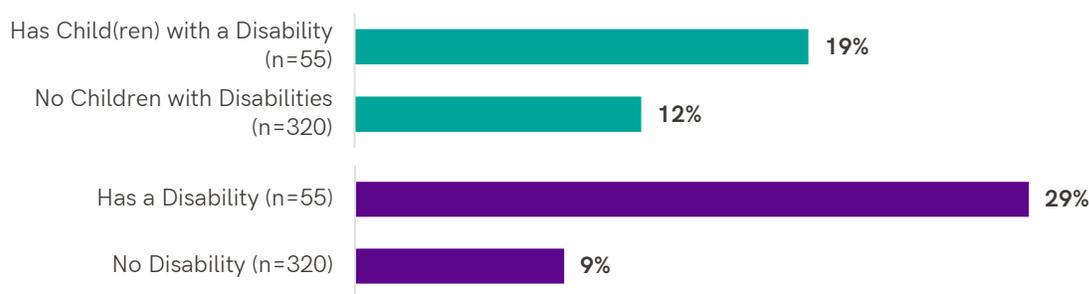
Many respondents are living with real uncertainty about whether their food will last through the month or whether they will be able to afford the kinds of meals they want and need. Survey data show that 16% said it was often or sometimes true that the food they bought did not last and they did not have money to get more, and 17% said they often or sometimes could not afford healthy, balanced meals. More severe experiences were less common but still present: 6% reported being hungry but not eating because they did not have enough money for food, and another 6% said they ate less than they felt they should for the same reason. Among those who ate less due to cost, most said this happened some months but not every month (56%), while 28% said it happened almost every month. Food insecurity also intersects with other essential expenses—10% reported skipping or delaying bills (such as tuition, rent, or electricity) in order to have enough money for food.

### Subpopulations That Are Particularly Vulnerable

While food insecurity affects respondents across the sample, the survey identifies several subpopulations that appear to face elevated risk. A larger proportion of survey respondents who have children (31%) compared to those who do not (20%) have marginal or low/very low food security. In addition, nearly one-quarter (23%) of households with older adults, and 44% of Russian-speaking respondents report marginal or low/very low food security.

The survey also points to heightened vulnerability among respondents with disabilities. Respondents who reported that they or someone in their household has a disability experienced low/very low food insecurity at notably higher rates (29% and 19% respectively) than respondents without disabilities (9% and 12% respectively). This finding is consistent with the broader reality that disability can increase expenses, reduce earning capacity, and create additional logistical barriers to shopping and cooking.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents with Low or Very Low Food Security by Disability Status**



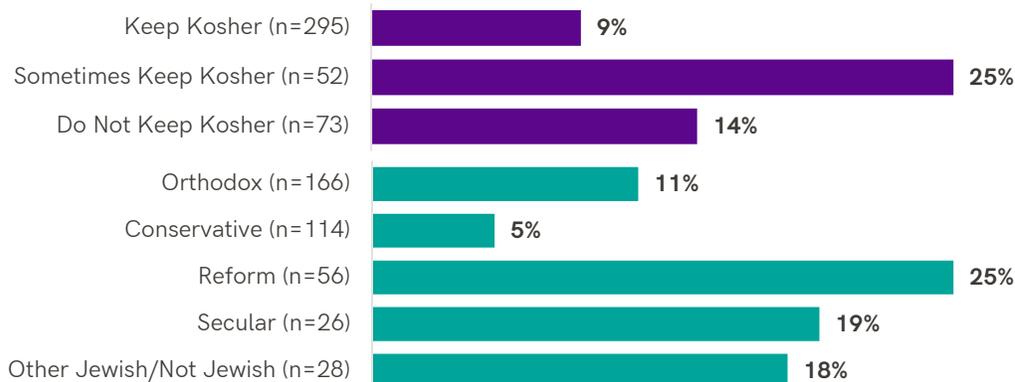
Food insecurity also varies based on geographic location. In absolute terms, Fairfield County has the largest number of Jewish adults experiencing food insecurity, reflecting its larger Jewish population overall and indicating where the greatest number of individuals require support. Litchfield, Tolland, and Windham Counties have the highest rate of food insecurity among Jewish adults, meaning a higher percent of Jewish adults in these counties are experiencing food insecurity, even though the total population is smaller. Examining both absolute numbers and percentages helps distinguish between where food insecurity is most prevalent and where it affects the greatest number of people, providing a more complete picture of need across communities. See Figure 2 below for extrapolated food insecurity rates by region.

**Figure 2. Extrapolated Food Insecurity Rates and Numbers among Connecticut Jewish Residents**

County/Region	Estimated percentage of Jewish adults who face food insecurity	Approximated number of Jewish adults who face food insecurity
New Haven County	11.7%	3,377
Hartford County	12.1%	3,147
Fairfield County	9.1%	4,085
Middlesex and New London Counties	12.4%	1,127
Litchfield, Tolland, and Windham Counties	12.8%	236
<b>Connecticut total</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>11,972</b>

Finally, food insecurity patterns differ by kosher practice and across Jewish denominational identities. Among respondents who reported keeping kosher, 9% experienced low/very low food security; among those who keep kosher sometimes, 25% experienced low/very low food security. By denominational identity, 25% of Reform respondents experienced low/very low food security, compared with 5% of Conservative respondents and 11% of Orthodox respondents.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 3. Percentage of Respondents with Low and Very Low Food Security by Subgroup**



## Financial Instability

Survey data show that food insecurity is closely tied to broader financial vulnerability; those experiencing low food security are far more likely to be living with financial strain. Half of respondents who “do not have enough to meet basic expenses” and 34% of those “just meeting basic expenses” experience low/very low food security. In comparison, only 7% of people who say they are “meeting basic expenses with a little left over for extras” and 2% of people who say they are “living comfortably” experience low/very low food security.

Food insecurity is often part of a wider affordability crisis, in which households are forced to make tradeoffs between food and other essentials. This pattern is reflected in the share of respondents who reported delaying

<sup>3</sup> Most (66%) of the survey responses who identify as Reform are also Russian-speaking Jews who, as noted above, are more likely to experience low food security.

or skipping bills in order to have enough money for food. Food insecurity is also associated with worsening finances over time; about half of those experiencing marginal or low/very low food security report that their financial situation has deteriorated in recent years.

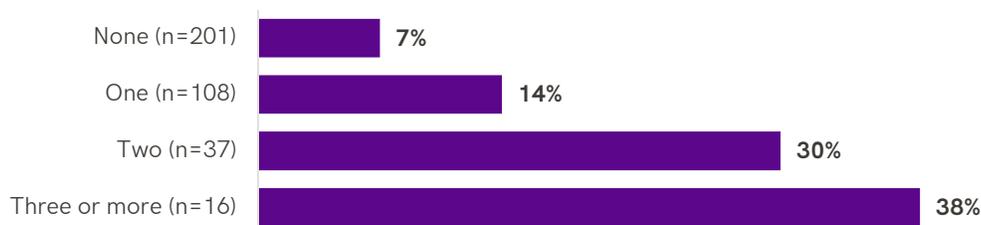
Households facing food insecurity are also more likely to struggle with other basic needs (see Figure 4). Compared to more food-secure respondents, those with low or very low food security report significantly greater difficulty paying for medical care, rent or mortgage, and utilities. Among respondents who keep kosher, substantial shares report challenges covering medical expenses (42% compared to 15% of those who do not keep kosher), rent or mortgage (50% compared to 25%), and utilities (51% compared to 33%), highlighting the compounded financial pressures some households face. Geographic differences also emerge: residents of New Haven are more likely than those in Hartford to report difficulty paying for these necessities.

**Figure 4. Difficulty Paying for Other Necessities**

Had difficulty paying for	Among respondents who ...						
	Low/very low food security	Marginal food security	High food security	Keep Kosher	Do not keep Kosher	Live in Hartford	Live in New Haven
Medical care for yourself or family	54%	21%	18%	42%	15%	19%	61%
Rent or mortgage	55%	33%	27%	50%	25%	22%	70%
Utility bills like water, gas, or electricity	69%	41%	23%	51%	33%	29%	72%

The survey also highlights the effects of life events and disruption on food insecurity. Food insecurity is more common among respondents who have experienced multiple traumatic events in recent years—such as job loss, disability, illness, or family changes. As illustrated in Figure 5, no single traumatic event is the “cause” of food insecurity in a simple way; instead, the data suggest that the accumulation of disruptions creates heightened vulnerability.

**Figure 5. Percentage of Respondents with Low/Very Low Food Security by Number of Traumatic Events**

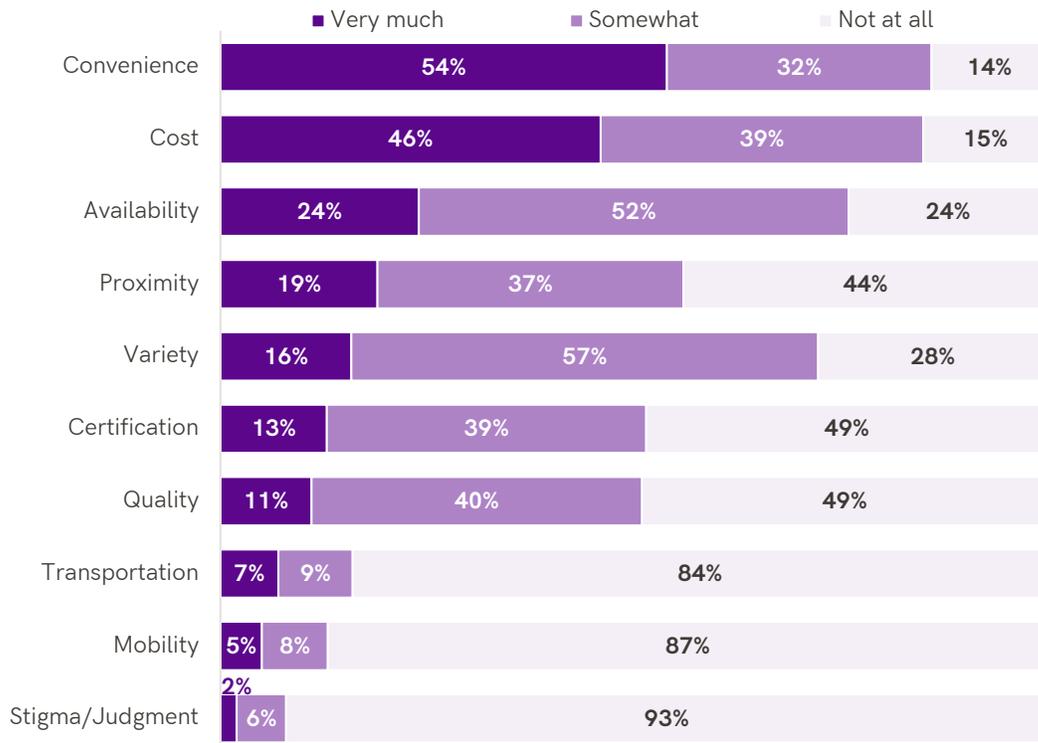


## Barriers to Accessing Kosher Food

Respondents report that accessing kosher food is affected by multiple barriers, particularly cost, convenience, and availability. Cost emerges as one of the most significant constraints. Nearly half of Hartford residents (49%) say that cost very much affects their ability to purchase kosher food, as do 40% of New Haven residents. Many respondents also describe convenience-related barriers, including limited kosher prepared food options and limited kosher restaurants. Product availability presents another obstacle. Respondents note that kosher items are not always reliably stocked, creating uncertainty in shopping. This issue appears more

pronounced in New Haven, where 29% report that availability affects them, compared to 20% of Hartford residents.

**Figure 6. Barriers to Accessing Kosher Food (n=339)**



Proximity plays a role as well. While most respondents report travel times of 20 minutes or less to access kosher food, a meaningful minority (25%) travel much longer. For those households, the time and logistics required to purchase kosher food can add another layer of burden, especially for seniors, people with disabilities, or families balancing multiple responsibilities.

Kosher catering access is similarly shaped by cost. Among respondents who wanted or purchased kosher catering in the past year, nearly half of respondents (49%) report that the expense of kosher catering affects their ability to access it. This matters because kosher catering and prepared food are often integral to religious and communal life, including holidays and lifecycle events.

## Existing Supports to Address Food Insecurity

Connecticut has a meaningful—but highly fragmented—set of supports and infrastructure to address kosher food insecurity. Existing supports include kosher food pantries (including mobile options), meal delivery programs (such as weekly Shabbat meals and flexible frozen meal kits), and partnerships with local kosher markets and restaurants to provide subsidized or donated meals. In addition, many organizations provide vouchers or gift cards for kosher shopping and offer wraparound case management supports like SNAP enrollment, utility assistance, and rent support alongside food aid. These efforts are often concentrated in a few geographic hubs (e.g., West Hartford, New Haven, Stamford, and Waterbury) and rely heavily on volunteers, coordination with synagogues and Federations, and regional or NYC-based distributors to source

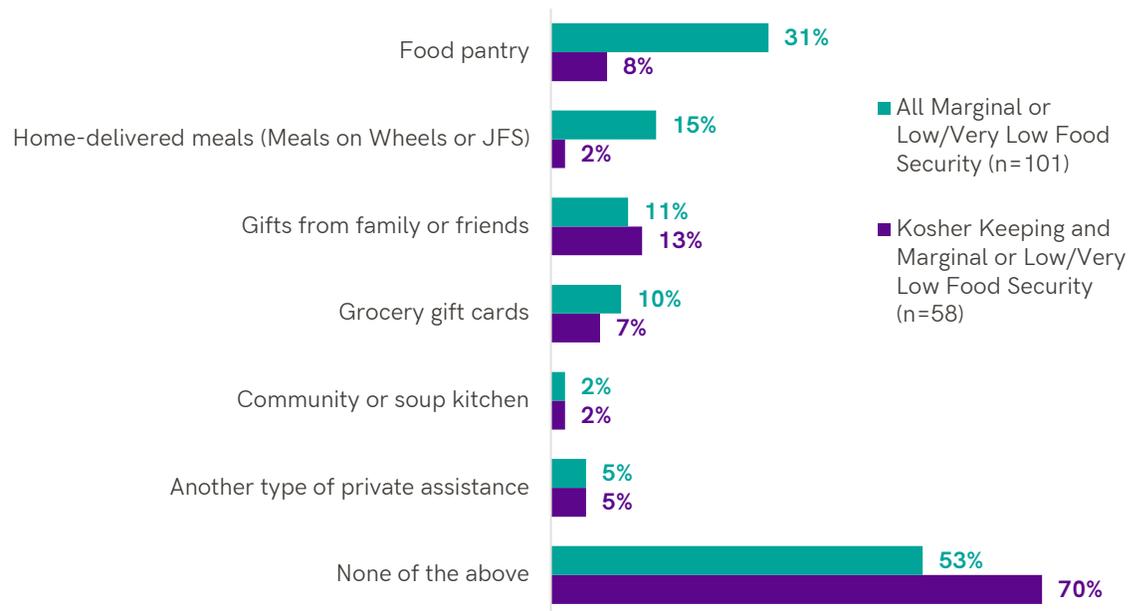
kosher products—meaning that while food access exists, affordability and uneven infrastructure remain key challenges.

Survey findings suggest that a substantial share of respondents experiencing food insecurity are not consistently accessing the communal support that already exist in Connecticut. Half of respondents with marginal, low, or very low food security—and 70% of those who keep kosher—report using no communal support at all. Similarly, public food assistance does not reach everyone who could benefit: Public food assistance programs also fail to reach many who could benefit. Among all respondents and kosher-keeping households experiencing marginal or low/very low food security, only 30% report that someone in their household receives assistance such as SNAP or WIC. These gaps suggest that existing safety nets may not be fully accessible or responsive to the needs of food-insecure households.

Among respondents with marginal, low, or very low food security, food pantries (31%) and home-delivered meals (15%) are the most frequently accessed resources. However, participation rates are considerably lower among households seeking kosher food, with only 8% using food pantries and 2% accessing home-delivered meals. Instead, kosher-keeping households experiencing food insecurity are more likely to rely on informal supports, such as gifts from family (13%) and grocery gift cards (7%), to meet their needs.

Overall, both institutional and informal supports appear underutilized among those facing food insecurity. The reliance of kosher-keeping households on informal networks in particular points to potential barriers—such as limited kosher options or lack of accessibility—that may be shaping how and whether families seek assistance.

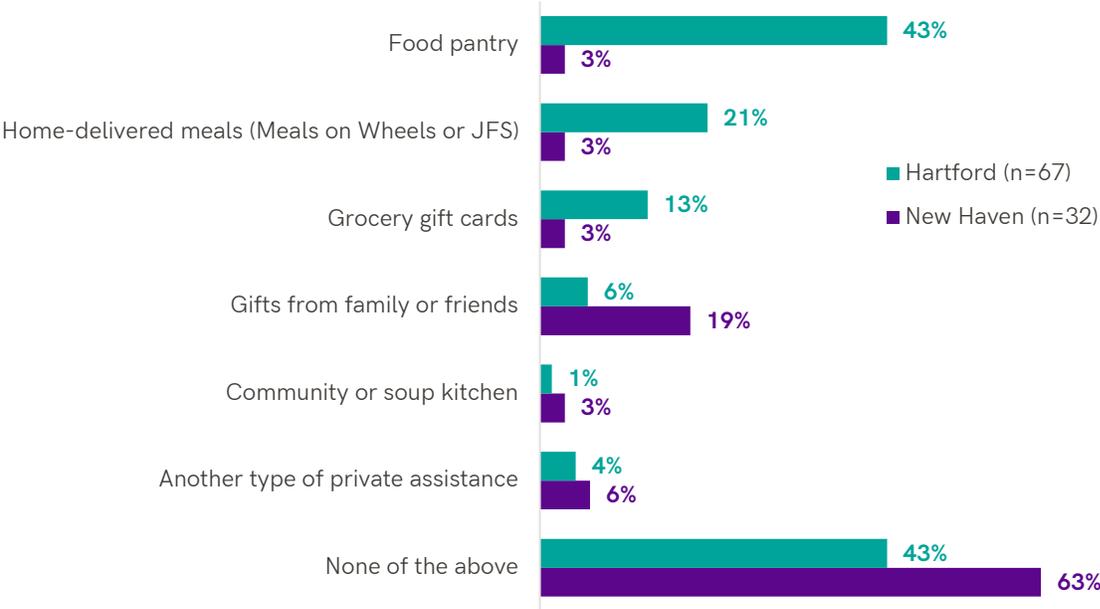
**Figure 7. Use of Communal Supports among Respondents with Marginal, Low, or Very Low Food Security**



Use of communal support varies substantially by geography, reflecting differences in both infrastructure and access. In Hartford—where a food pantry and home-delivered meal services are available—43% of respondents experiencing food insecurity report using a food pantry and 21% access home-delivered meals.

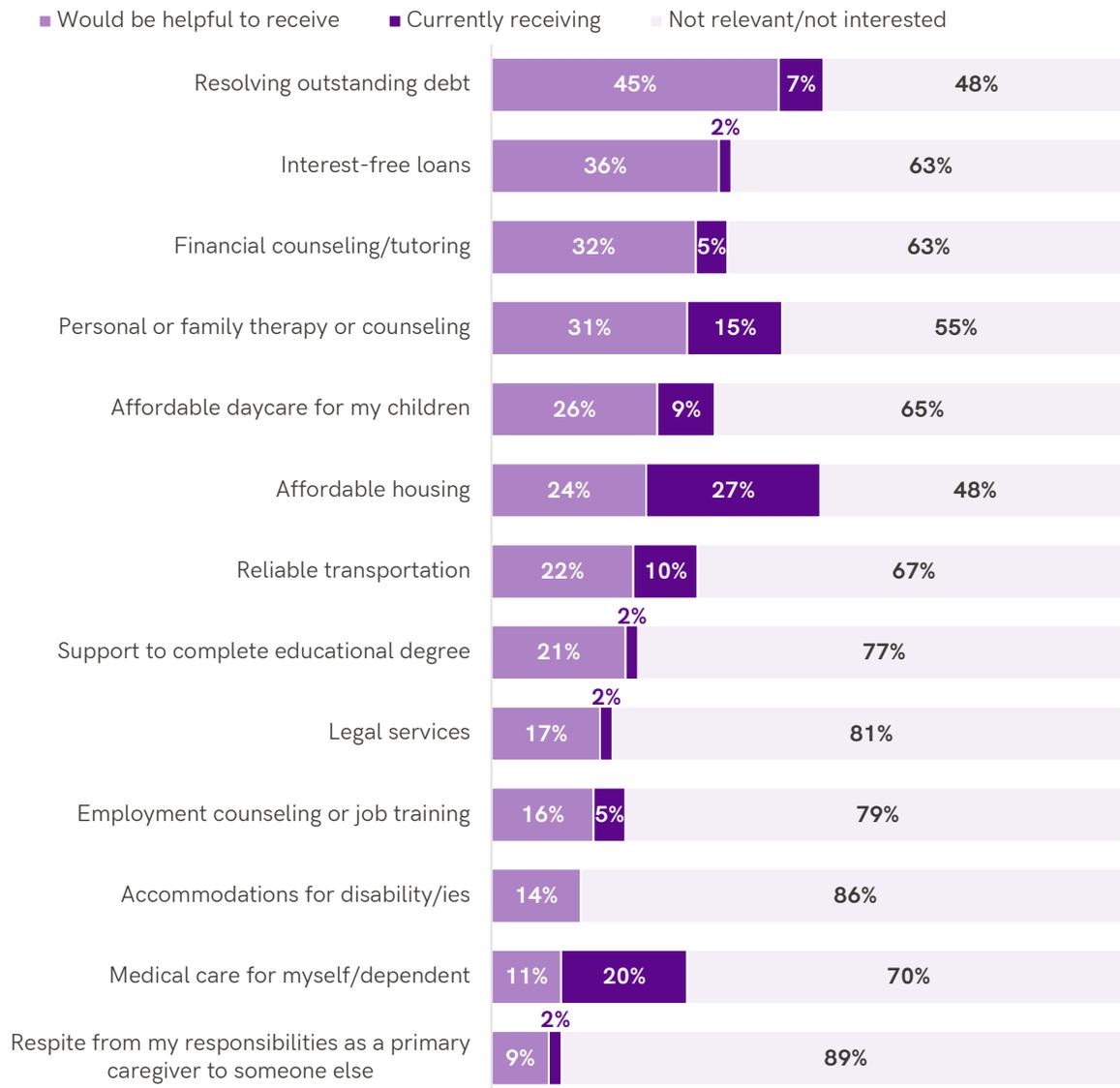
In contrast, only 3% of food-insecure respondents in New Haven report using **either of** these types of resources. Instead, New Haven residents are more likely to rely on informal support, such as gifts from family or friends (19%, compared to 6% in Hartford). At the same time, a greater proportion of food-insecure respondents in New Haven report going without any support at all (63%, compared to 43% in Hartford). Taken together, these findings suggest that the presence—and perhaps visibility—of local communal infrastructure plays a significant role in whether households access assistance.

**Figure 8. Use of Communal Supports among Respondents with Marginal, Low, or Very Low Food Security by County**



In addition to underutilization of food-specific supports, respondents experiencing food insecurity also point to unmet needs that extend beyond food itself. Among food-insecure respondents, the most commonly desired forms of support relate to financial stabilization: 45% report that resolving outstanding debt would be helpful, and 36% say interest-free loans would be helpful. Respondents also express interest in supports that address the emotional and structural dimensions of hardship, with 31% indicating that personal or family therapy/counseling would be helpful and 32% identifying financial counseling/tutoring as helpful. Needs related to household stability and access also appear, including 24% who say affordable housing would be helpful and 22% who say reliable transportation would be helpful. Residents of New Haven feel these needs more acutely than those in Hartford; a larger proportion of respondents would find it helpful to receive additional supports.

**Figure 9. Desired Supports among Respondents with Marginal, Low, or Very Low Food Security (n=56)**



Together, these findings suggest that while food pantries and meal programs remain important, many households experiencing food insecurity may benefit most from a combination of direct food support and interventions that strengthen overall financial resilience and reduce the risk of recurring food insecurity.

## Implications for Advocacy and Practice

The findings suggest several strategic directions:

### 1. **Expand food assistance resources**

Strengthen the kosher food safety net by expanding current kosher pantry capacity, increasing distribution of grocery gift cards/vouchers for kosher retailers, and developing subsidy models for high-cost items (e.g., chicken, meat, holiday staples).

### 2. **Target outreach and program design to the most vulnerable subgroups**

Expanding mobile food delivery could significantly improve access for seniors, people with disabilities, and households outside kosher hubs.

3. **Provide supports to address financial insecurity**

Pair food support with debt resolution help, interest-free loans, financial coaching, and benefits navigation so households can address other associated financial risks.

4. **Advance statewide coordination**

A coordinated, statewide approach—bringing together JFS agencies, Federations, pantries, and advocates—could amplify purchasing power, expand access to kosher food outside of kosher hubs, and strengthen the case for state and federal investment.

## Conclusion

Food insecurity is a meaningful and persistent issue within Connecticut’s Jewish community, resulting in gaps in food access and broader instability in household finances and well-being. While existing communal supports provide critical relief, many households experiencing food insecurity are not consistently reached, and the burden is concentrated among particularly vulnerable subgroups—including families with children, older adults, Russian-speaking households, and those impacted by disability. Addressing this challenge will require statewide coordination that both strengthens and expands the kosher food safety net across the state and pairs food assistance with interventions that stabilize households over time, such as benefits enrollment, transportation supports, and debt relief. This study provides a foundation for that work—documenting the need, illuminating lived experience, and pointing toward strategic opportunities to ensure that Jewish households across Connecticut can meet their food needs with dignity.