

REPORT

"Hunger in Nashville: NORTH NASHVILLE"

Prepared by

**Metro Social Services:
Strategic Planning & Research**

Date

September 18, 2025

Introduction

Metro Social Services continues to evaluate the socioeconomic state of Nashville residents by monitoring, observing, and analyzing trends that accurately measure the standard of living of the community. These evaluations also provide a means to systematically address needs and identify community resources and opportunities that can improve the wellbeing of the most vulnerable population.

The standard of living of many American households has been in decline even before the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These financial hardships have squeezed the budgets of many low-income households, including those with older adults on fixed incomes. The diminishing purchasing power of households impacts their ability to obtain essential goods such as food and other basic items. Other segments of society, including single parents, minority groups, and low-income workers also experience a significant decline in their standard of living.

Despite significant recent economic growth in Nashville, various neighborhoods have seen many residents experiencing stagnating or declining ability to meet basic needs. Some of these developments that disfigured communities and reshaped neighborhoods occurred in North Nashville. As a result, these phenomena adversely impacted the lives of longtime residents.

Today, poverty remains endemic in North Nashville and compounds daily struggles for many residents. Persistent poverty exacerbates hunger, disrupts housing stability, contributes to poor educational outcomes, and hinders access to good job opportunities.

Hunger itself is a highly visible manifestation of human hardship, albeit with complex issues and solutions. There is growing concern about recent federal legislation that will severely limit or eliminate public benefits that are a lifeline to addressing hunger. Advocates point to the extraordinary hardships that older populations, children, and low-wage households now will face due to major cuts to SNAP and USDA programs such as Local Food for Schools, The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and Local Food Purchase Assistance.

The imminent implementation of these changes calls for proactively examining the potential impact that hunger has on the lives of these communities. A systematic assessment of the urgent policy issues, existing hunger conditions, and changing patterns and trends can advance understanding of hunger as a human hardship in North Nashville. Examining the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of ZIP code 37208, which covers a significant part of North Nashville, can help reveal the nature and extent of hunger in this community. This examination can also help to clarify concepts of hunger, food affordability, food access, and food deserts – since these concepts are often confused – and to make the issues visible to both community members and policymakers.

ZIP Code 37208:

The New and Urgent Needs

- The newly passed federal legislation will drastically reduce SNAP benefits and other supports for struggling families and will worsen the already difficult circumstance of many living in food insecure areas such as ZIP code 37208.
- Estimates by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities indicate that as many as 57,000 persons across Tennessee will lose SNAP benefits that help to overcome hunger and food insecurity for those households.
- Cuts to SNAP benefits will impact some areas much more severely than others. This is a reminder that hunger can be due to many factors, most often related to poverty and lack of money to purchase food. While proximity to grocery stores and food outlets in neighborhoods may suggest that access to food is an end itself, yet ultimately absolute hunger and lack of food points back to a lack of money to purchase food, regardless of where or how it may be available. Thus, SNAP cuts will hurt the most where poverty is the most severe, namely ZIP code 37208.
- The increased work requirements for SNAP and Medicaid/ TennCare recipients in recent federal legislation are also likely to have adverse effects on populations struggling to make ends meet. While approximately 70 percent of SNAP and Medicaid recipients across the U.S. are already working, those who cannot work due to disability, caregiving responsibilities, and other factors are likely to further struggle in meeting their overall health and food security needs.

- People who receive SNAP benefits and other supports may encounter the “benefits cliff” phenomenon whereby any slight increase in income could place them above an eligibility threshold and leave them in a worse economic situation even while earning more or working more.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently cut over \$1 billion in federal funding for food programs that support local farmers and provide food to schools and food banks.

Affected Programs

- **Local Food for Schools (LFS)**: The USDA cut approximately \$660 million from this program, which supported schools and childcare institutions in purchasing local, nutritious food.
- **Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA)**: The USDA canceled this program, which provided over \$500 million to food banks and emergency food providers to buy directly from local farmers.
- **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)**: The agency paused \$500 million in funding for TEFAP, a core program that distributes food commodities to food banks for distribution to low-income households.

Impact of the Cuts

Food Insecurity: The funding cuts threaten to increase food insecurity, especially for vulnerable populations like children and seniors. Children who relied on these benefits during the summer will have less access to food. LFPA was established by Congress in 2023, and Tennessee had received substantial federal funds to support it.

Food Banks and Schools: Food banks and schools are struggling to replace lost local food purchases, potentially leading to reduced deliveries of fresh and nutritious foods. Organizations like Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee have already lost significant federal food supplies and are struggling to meet the rising demand.

Domino Effect: These federal cuts are creating a ripple effect that disrupts families, farmers, grocers, and classrooms across the state.

More Needed to address Hunger: Advocates emphasize that charitable food banks cannot absorb the full overflow from these cuts and that community-wide support is necessary.

SNAP Benefits Cut: Proposed and recent cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are expected to increase food insecurity and poverty, leading to negative health outcomes, weakening local economies, and straining aid organizations. According to reports from organizations like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), the Urban Institute, and the Commonwealth Fund, recent benefit reductions are projected to cause significant harm.

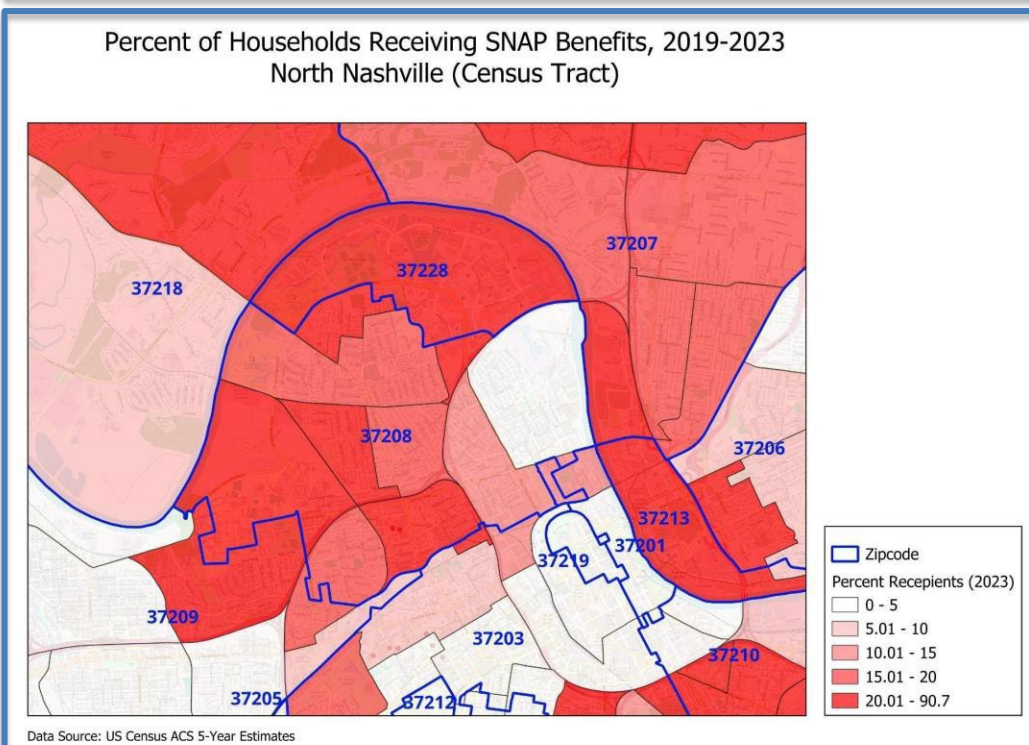
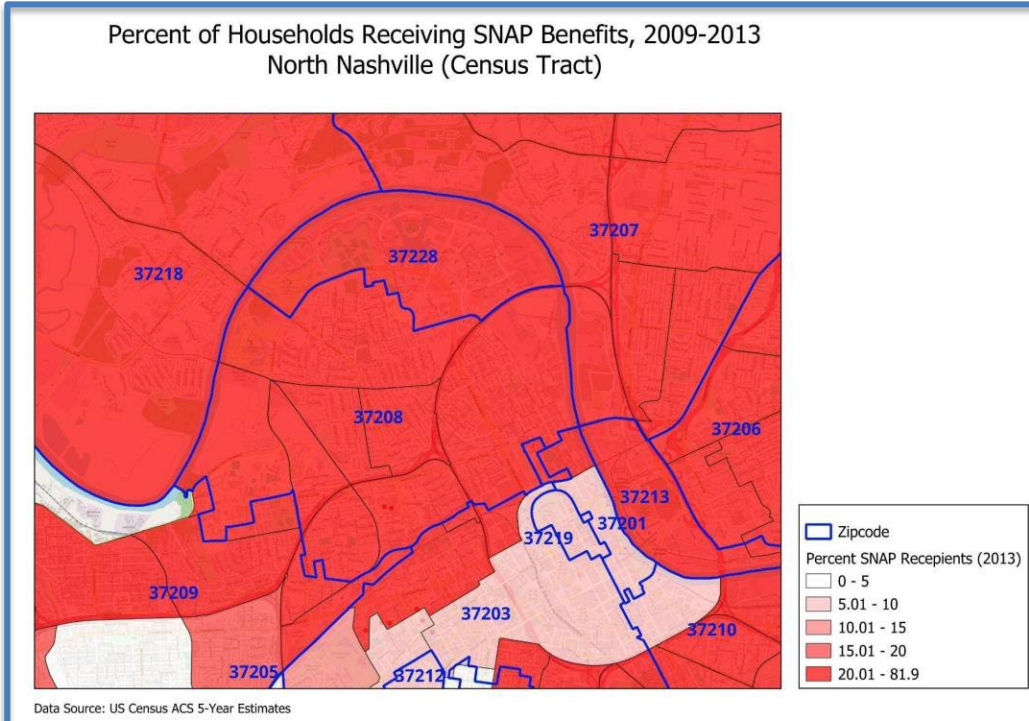
Effects on low-income individuals

- **Reduced benefits:** The elimination of pandemic-era benefit increases and restrictions on future adjustments to the Thrifty Food Plan (the basis for SNAP benefits) will reduce the purchasing power of all SNAP recipients.
- **Worsened food insecurity:** Analysts project that millions of people, including many children and senior citizens, will see their food assistance cut or terminated, leading to higher rates of food insecurity.
- **Increased poverty and hardship:** Lower SNAP benefits are expected to increase poverty and place additional financial stress on low-income families, who may be forced to choose between paying for groceries, medicine, or utilities.
- **Negative health outcomes:** Research indicates a strong link between SNAP participation and better health. Cuts to benefits could result in poorer health, developmental delays in children, and higher healthcare costs.

Broader economic consequences

- **Job losses:** The Commonwealth Fund and George Washington University estimates that SNAP and Medicaid cuts combined could lead to over 1 million job losses. The drop in consumer spending would hurt food retailers, farmers, and other industries.
- **Reduced economic stimulus:** The USDA estimates that for every \$1 of SNAP spending in a slowing economy, up to \$1.54 in economic activity is generated. Cuts weaken this stimulus, hindering economic recovery.
- **Retailer impacts:** Rural and high-poverty areas with local grocers dependent on SNAP sales are especially vulnerable to store closures.
- **This will be the first time in the modern history of SNAP that the federal government no longer ensures that the lowest-income families with children, older adults, and people with disabilities in every state have access to the food assistance they need.**

The following two maps indicate the changes in the level of SNAP participation between 2009-2013 and 2019-2023. While participation has decreased in some areas, it remains significantly high in the western portion of 37208 which continues to be the older, less gentrified, and more poverty-dense area.



Source: Maps by Dr. Wansoo Im, Meharry Medical College

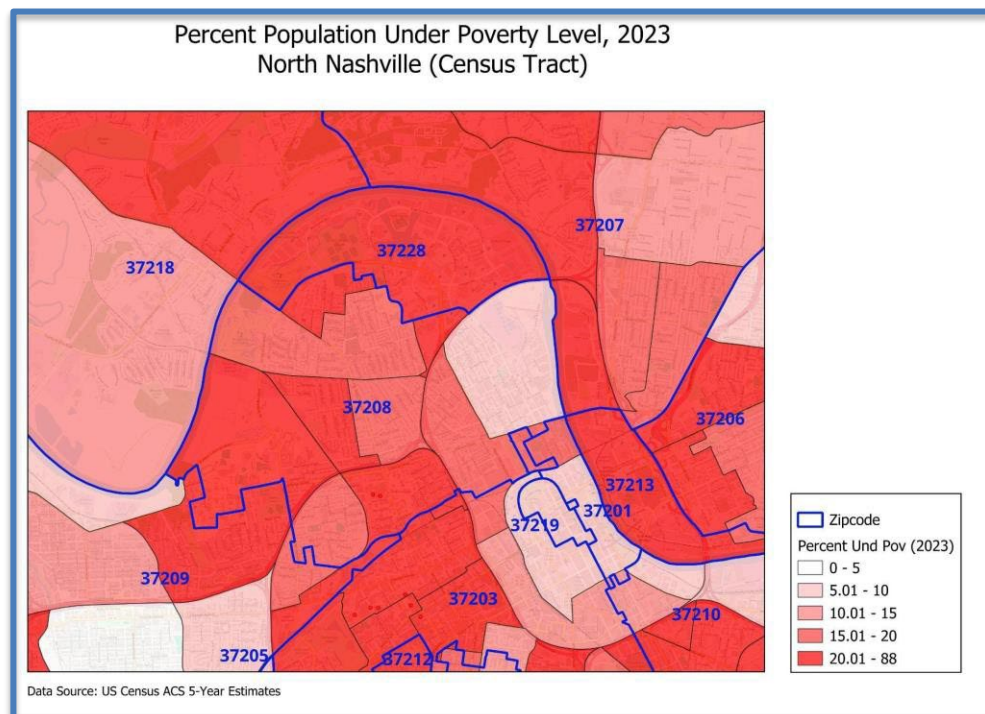
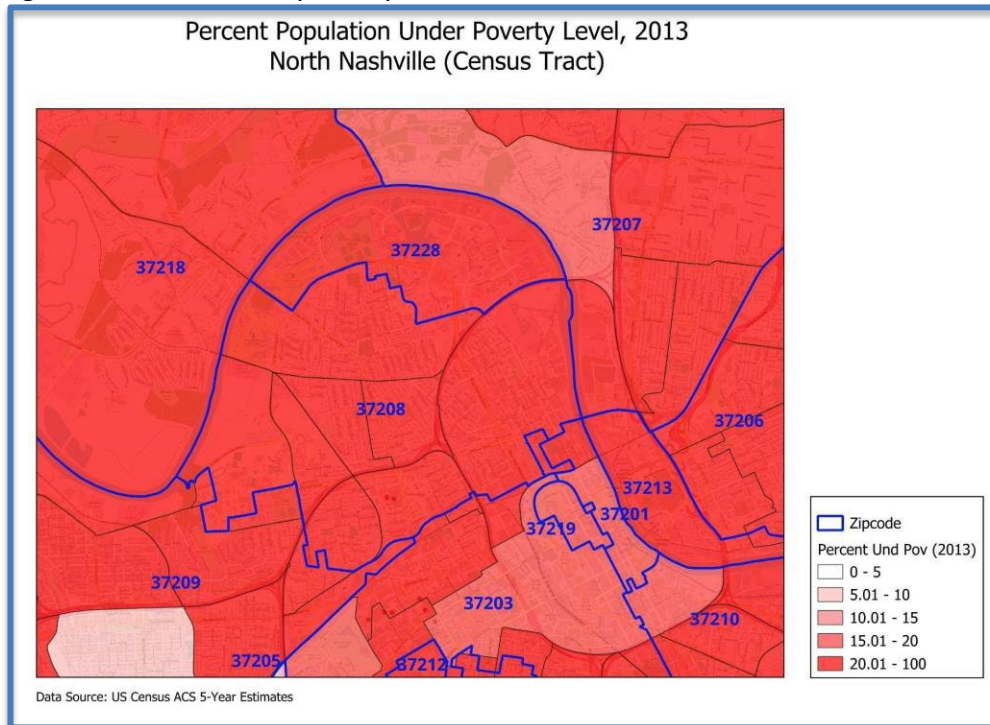
Very low food security is viewed as a more severe and debilitating condition than uncertain access to nutritious foods. Food insecurity has root causes that are economic in nature. USDA, 2022

ZIP Code 37208:

The Existing Impact of Poverty on Hunger

- As in many areas of Davidson County, ZIP Code 37208 has experienced changing demographic patterns and the phenomenon of gentrification. Over the last 10 years, new developments have brought in younger populations that earn much higher incomes. This serves to dilute the issue of severe poverty that remains present in much of the area. Further, these pressures even intensify the hardship of those populations “left behind” in poverty as property values and property taxes escalate which squeeze older, poorer homeowners and raise apartment rents far beyond previous rates of increase.
- This changes the statistics and metrics used in assessing hunger in a neighborhood: while vulnerable residents still exist, their proportion shrinks because new higher-income populations dilute the numbers. An example of this: the elderly population dropped from 10.4% to 10.2% from 2018 to 2023, but the absolute number of people over age 65 and in need remains constant (1,825 vs. 2,056, ACS 5-year estimates, 2014-2018 and 2019-2026).
- Currently, one adult with two children in Davidson County needs to earn \$99,387 a year as a Living Wage. This household also needs \$10,456 a year to afford food. The median income for an individual in 37208 is \$41,510 (ACS 2019-2023), compared to \$46,205 for Davidson County as a whole.
- Additionally, 23.0% of the population in 37208 is below the federal poverty threshold, compared to 13.9% of Davidson County overall. Overall, 8.6% of Davidson County households receive SNAP benefits; in 37208, 17.3% of households receive cash public assistance or SNAP (ACS 5-year estimates, 2019-2023).

The following two maps indicate the changes in the level of poverty between 2009-2013 and 2019-2023. While poverty rates have decreased in some areas, it remains significantly high in the western portion of 37208 which remains the older, less gentrified, and more poverty-dense area.



Source: Maps by Dr. Wansoo Im, Meharry Medical College

ZIP Code 37208:

The Historical Legacies of Poverty and Hunger

- ZIP Code 37208 represents the epicenter of Nashville’s segregated past and the legacies that this past has left behind.
- Food access is simply more than geography. Living near a grocery store does not guarantee access. For instance, older adults (65+) or persons with a disability may not be able to physically carry groceries, low-income individuals may live close but cannot afford food, and people with disabilities may be near a store but unable to transport food. In short, the long-term history of disinvestment in post-segregation North Nashville not only reduced earlier intact food systems but disrupted the environment such that poverty became even more endemic and cross-generational. The complexity of the history of 37208 quite simply has resulted in multiple layers of impoverishment and lack of opportunity for residents which perpetuate the high levels of hunger that result.
- This complex history of 37208 emphasizes the reality that the issues of hunger and food insecurity are foremost economic issues, compounded for some persons by mobility, and physical ability.
- The “redlining” of areas of Nashville is a policy practice from the mid-20th century that continues to have repercussions for poverty and hunger in 37208 today . According to Mapping Inequality:

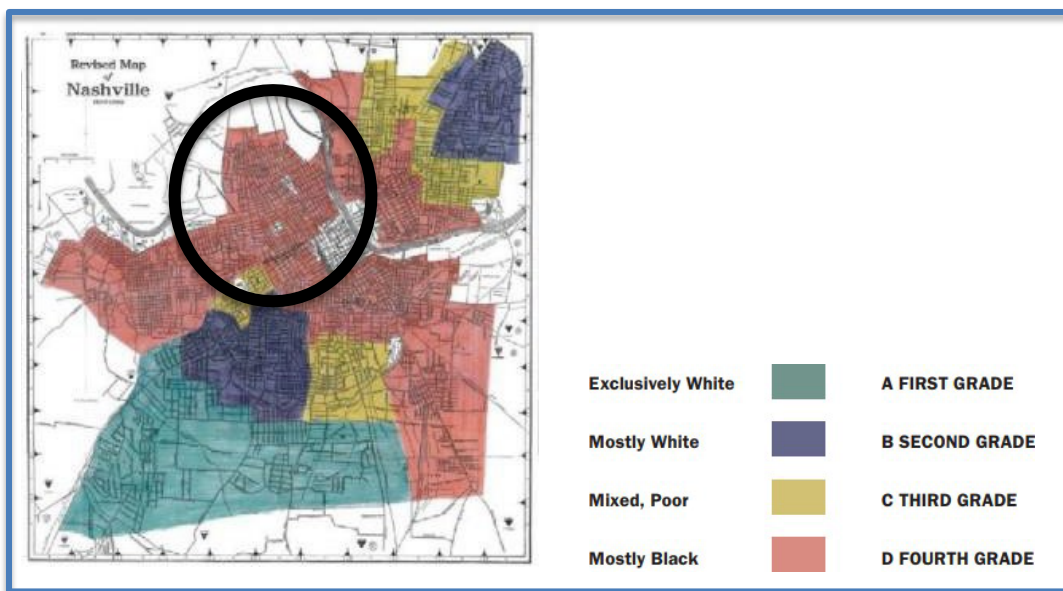
“In 1940, around the time that the HOLC residential security map for Nashville likely was being drafted by local real estate and banking professionals and their delegates, the city was a small regional hub on a serpentine river. Nonetheless, HOLC redlining maps in Nashville show patterns akin to other cities its size and larger. Redlined "hazardous" fourth grade and yellow "definitely declining" third grade areas provided a visual shorthand for where the three interstate highways that converge in Nashville—I-40, I-65, and I-24—would soon cut their paths.

Marked for mortgage disinvestment, North Nashville was soon also a focal point for segregated Black public housing and the massive destruction of equity and community that came with interstate highway construction. Jefferson Street had been a Black business and cultural corridor, but it was bisected by Interstate 40. The highway stood atop towering concrete pillars and cast shadows across the once-thriving link

between Tennessee State, Fisk, and downtown. Despite legal challenges by a coalition of Black Nashville leaders, highway construction proceeded.

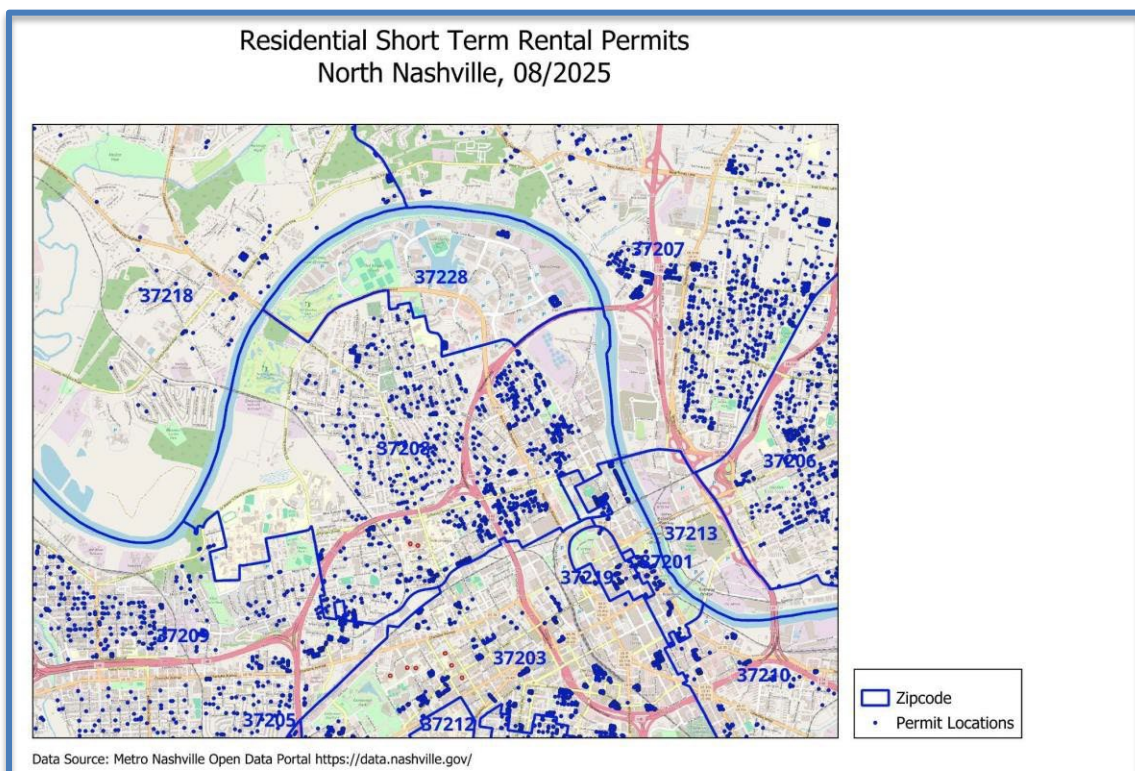
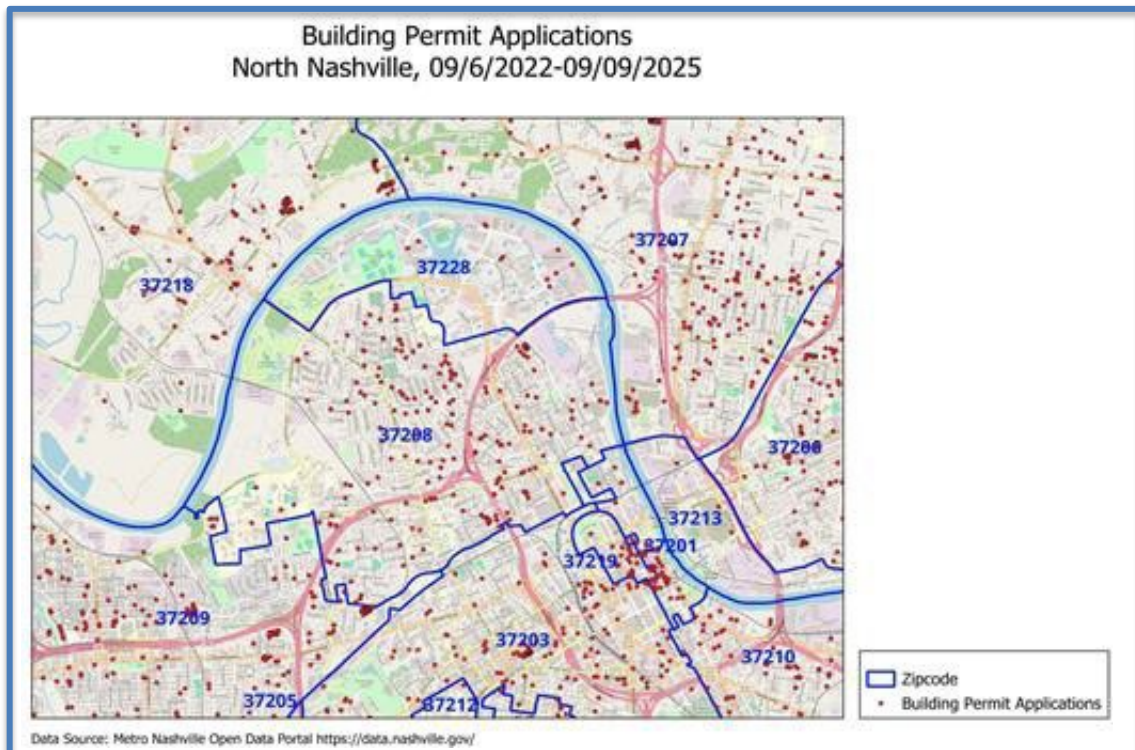
When Nashville's population started to boom in the 1990s, both through domestic migration and international immigration, many newcomers and developers saw this area as attractively close to downtown. Capital flowed into the area again. Yet as continued poverty, underemployment, and struggling local schools show, not all Nashvillians have seen reinvestment's benefits. Today the eastern portion of 1940's large “redlined” area roughly aligns with Nashville's zip code 37208. In 2018, a Brookings Institution study found 37208 to have the highest rate of incarceration in the nation, with nearly 1 in 7 children who were born there between 1980 and 1986 behind bars on any given day in their early 30's.

**Redlining Map Once Used by the Real Estate and Development Sector
in Nashville and Vicinity of ZIP Code 37208**



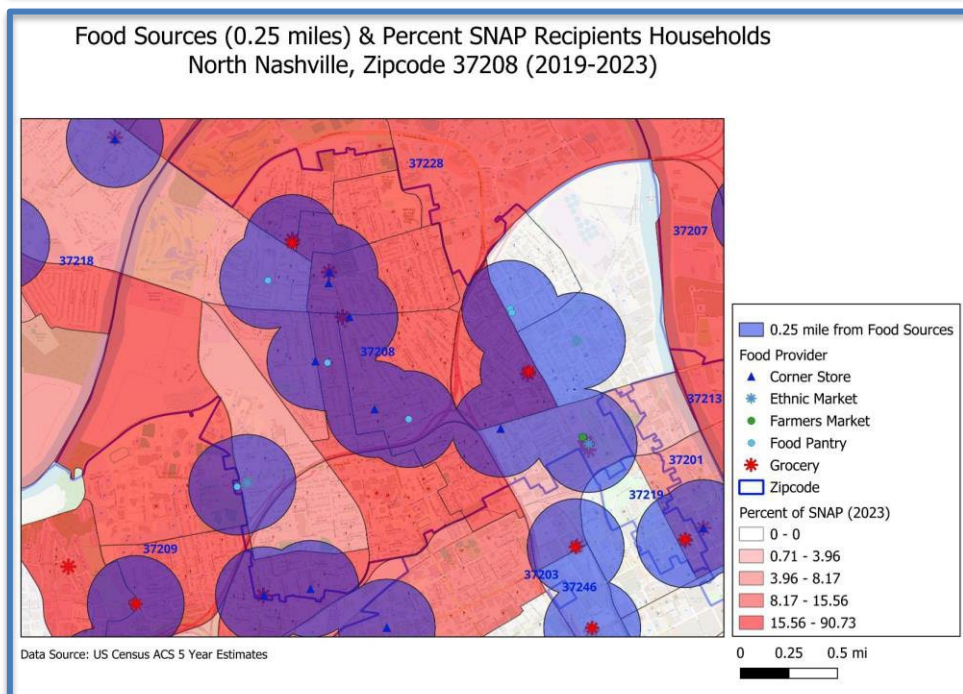
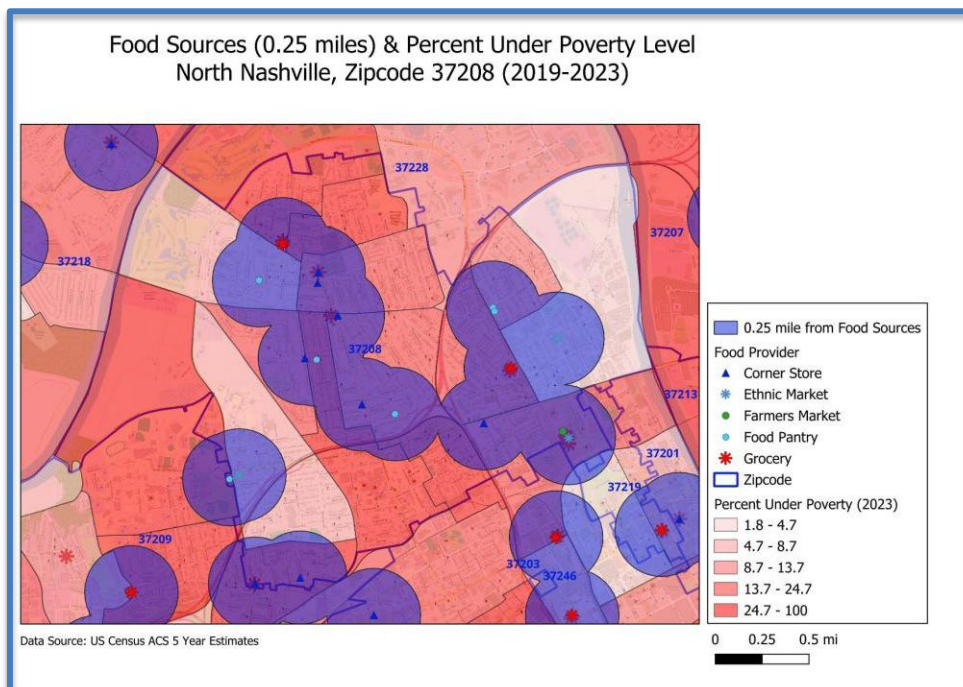
The long legacy of segregation and its aftermath in both policy and practice continue to have implications for poverty and hunger in ZIP code 37208 today. The development patterns of displacement and gentrification have led to even greater instances of isolation of households in this area with higher property values and accompanying taxes, but comparatively low incomes for individuals and households, including many that are on fixed incomes.

The following maps illustrate the development patterns of recent years in 37208 with the first showing building permit applications over the past three years and the second showing the pattern of existing short term rental property permits in that area.



Source: Maps by Dr. Wansoo Im, Meharry Medical College

Additionally, examination of food sources in ZIP code 37208 finds several areas where large shares of population below the federal poverty level and those receiving SNAP benefits reside more than a quarter mile away from any food source. This is a particular challenge for older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons lacking their own vehicle in terms of carrying groceries from a food source to their home.



Source: Maps by Dr. Wansoo Im, Meharry Medical College

As this report opens with an introduction to the issues of hunger in North Nashville, it concludes with the fact that the foundational reason for hunger is an inability to afford food, a lack of money. This gap in affordability of food can be extreme for many. The single mother with two children that needs \$99,387 for a living wage and \$10,456 a year for food probably earns half or less than that wage and the food budget is proportionately reduced. Hunger is an economic manifestation of poverty and poverty is endemic in many parts of North Nashville. The access to food outlets is important in all communities and for all parts of the population. Even so, the presence of food outlets alone cannot overcome the lack of residents’ ability to purchase food.

A comprehensive examination of hunger and the other reinforcing and collateral aspects of poverty in ZIP Code 37208 offers insight into the ways that research can guide strategies that address this issue. This examination also can provide the means to ensure that needs of all vulnerable populations are met and that they do not experience hunger or food insecurity: the frail elderly; persons with disabilities; and persons that lack a personal vehicle or other means to carry groceries to their home. Further research is needed to continue to explore and expand on the issues, challenges, and solutions for meeting the needs of hunger in 37208 and in Nashville.

DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Food Accessibility	Most measures and definitions consider at least some of the following indicators of access: • Accessibility to sources of healthy food, as measured by distance to a store or by the number of stores in an area; • Individual-level resources that may affect accessibility, such as family income or vehicle availability; and • Neighborhood-level indicators of resources, such as the average income of the neighborhood and the availability of public transportation. Food accessibility refers to the <i>availability</i> and <i>affordability</i> of healthy food options within a community, and the <i>ease</i> with which people can get to those foods. This includes factors like transportation, proximity of stores, and price. Private transportation is a meaningful indicator of food access, where of all the factors that seemingly limit access to food, the most important is no money but second in importance is no car.

Food Deserts	Food deserts refer to places that lack food outlets, particularly those selling higher quality, nutritious food. There are many ways to define which areas are considered low income and low access and many ways to measure food store access for individuals and for neighborhoods. Most measures and definitions consider at least some of the following indicators of access: • Accessibility to sources of healthy food, as measured by distance to a store or by the number of stores in an area; • Individual-level resources that may affect accessibility, such as family income or vehicle availability; and • Neighborhood-level indicators of resources, such as the average income of the neighborhood and the availability of public transportation.
Food Insecurity	Food insecurity means a household’s ability to acquire adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources. Extreme food insecurity results in hunger. Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security is a situation that exists when all people at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Food security is recognized as having four main dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and stability. In addition to these, the concept of food security has evolved to recognize the centrality of agency and sustainability.
Hunger	Hunger is the personal, physical sensation of discomfort and serious health impacts from not having enough to eat. Hunger is fundamentally an issue of poverty and lack of money to purchase food. Hunger must be addressed in urgent ways to meet the challenge of people who lack food due to lack of money for food or access to food support systems like SNAP.