

# HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY

## The status of families in Burlington Area School District Elementary Schools

**Food security** refers to the assured access to sufficient food for a healthy and active life.

**Food insecure** families may worry about not having enough food, eat inadequate foods, or skip meals due to lack of money.

At its most severe level, food insecurity can be described as **hunger**.

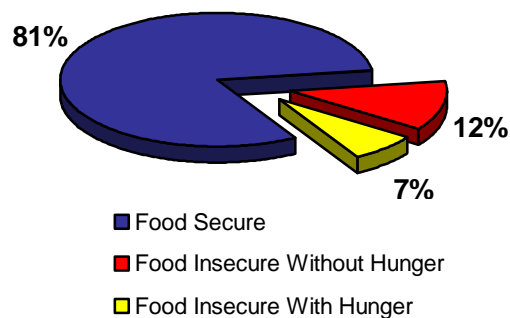
We know that hunger is a real problem for Wisconsin families. Nearly half a million people in Wisconsin live in households that are *food insecure* – they do not always have enough food for an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup> This means that 1 out of every 12 households is food insecure. Food insecurity in Wisconsin occurs in all types of households, but is more common among households that are poor, and in households headed by a single mother or a minority. Among all Wisconsin households with elementary school children, approximately 12% are food insecure.<sup>2</sup>

Little is known about how food insecurity varies within the state. However, it would be useful for particular counties, communities, or schools to find out if they have a high or low food insecurity rate.

In 2004, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, and the students, parents, teachers and administrators at Burlington Area School District elementary schools collaborated on a survey research project<sup>3</sup> to find out the food security status of local families and to learn more about how local families get their food. The results are based on 740 families completing the survey (78% return). Our findings include:

### Hunger and Food Insecurity

Almost one-fifth (19%) of families that responded to the survey are classified as food insecure, based on their responses to a series of questions. This includes 7% of families that experienced hunger in the past year. Although we cannot make precise comparisons to statewide rates<sup>4</sup>, food insecurity appears to be more prevalent among families with elementary school children in Burlington Area School District than among all families with elementary school children statewide. Research shows that food insecurity among children is linked to a variety of problems, such as lower test scores, increased absences and more frequent behavioral and health problems.



### Which families have the greatest risk?

Food insecurity is more common among low income households, although it occurs at all income levels. Survey results show that 28% of families responding are poor or near-poor (that is, they have incomes below 185% of the poverty line). Half (50%) of these households are food insecure, as compared to 8% of remaining households.

Survey results also show that households headed by a single mother have a greater risk of food insecurity than do other households. Forty-six percent of such households are food insecure, as compared to 15% of households headed by a couple. Households that rent their home are also at high risk—39% are food insecure, as compared to 13% of homeowners.

Food insecurity is not limited to the unemployed. In fact, 91% of all food insecure households report at least one worker in the household, including 83% with at least one fulltime worker.

<sup>1</sup> Nord, Mark. 2003. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing 1999-2001 data from the U.S. Census Bureau's current Population Survey.

<sup>2</sup> Nord, Mark. 2004. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing 2000-2002 data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

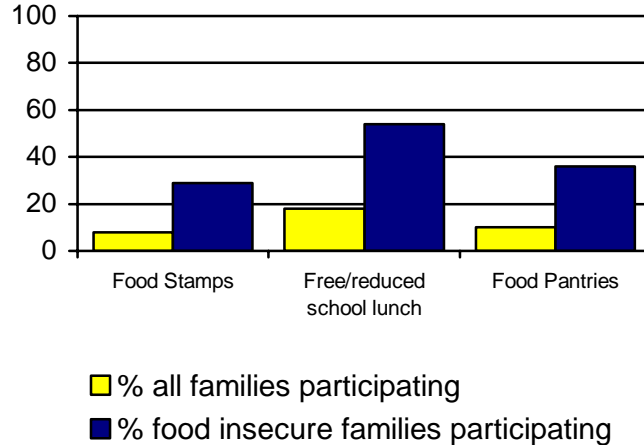
<sup>3</sup> Based on a take home survey completed by 740 families in elementary schools in Burlington Area School District. 78% of families returned a survey. We cannot know for sure how accurate our results are in describing all households, since some households did not return a survey. However, the reported rates of participation in free and reduced price meals are similar to the official rates for the schools. We expect, therefore, that our sample is reasonably representative of the district.

<sup>4</sup> It is not possible to compare this directly to the state as a whole, because statewide estimates are based on a different survey method (phone surveys) and a different time period (2000-2002).

## Participation in Nutrition Assistance Programs

Low income families may be eligible for a variety of nutrition assistance programs that can help provide food. Based on the income reported by respondents, some families appear to be missing out on programs for which they may qualify.

Eight percent of all families report that they received food stamps in the past year, while an additional 9% appear to be eligible but did not participate<sup>5</sup>. Eighteen percent of families say that their child(ren) received free or reduced price school lunch in the past year; an additional 12% appear to be eligible. Finally, 10% of families received food from a food pantry, church, or similar place in the past year. As shown in the figure, the majority of food insecure families do not participate in food assistance programs.



## Breakfast on School Days

Eating breakfast has been shown to improve classroom attention and academic achievement. Yet, almost one-quarter (23%) of parents say their child typically skips breakfast at least once during the school week. Except for the before-school program at Waller School, breakfast is not served at Burlington Area School District elementary schools.

## What Can Be Done?

Families who are struggling to provide food for their families can be helped in several ways.

- ❖ Encourage participation in free and reduced lunches at schools.
- ❖ Find a local sponsor for the summer lunch program for children.
- ❖ Identify and address barriers to food stamp program participation.  
The average amount of food stamp benefits received by qualifying Wisconsin households is \$165 per month.
- ❖ Explore options for offering breakfast at the school.  
43% of schools in Wisconsin that offer school lunch now offer breakfast.
- ❖ Donate food or money to local food pantries.  
Love, Inc and St. Vincent De Paul are in need of food throughout the year.
- ❖ Encourage low-resource families to participate in UW-Extension's Nutrition Education Program to learn ways to stretch food dollars while serving nutritious, safe foods. Call 262-635-6824 or toll-free (877) 469-3202 in Racine County, or 262-741-3190 in Walworth County.
- ❖ Learn more about hunger and the issues that affect your county at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/demographics/hunger/pdfs/Racine.pdf>

## For More Information

For complete results of the survey or for more information, contact Beverlee Baker, Family Living Educator, Racine County UW-Extension, [beverlee.baker@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:beverlee.baker@ces.uwex.edu), 262-886-8462, or the UW-Extension Racine Kenosha Nutrition Education Program, 262-635-6824.

For a food security profile of Racine County, visit the Wisconsin Food Security Project website at: <http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs>

<sup>5</sup> Eligibility is estimated based on reported income and household size. However, the eligibility rules for food stamps are complex, and some families that meet the income limits might still not qualify.