



Hunger Close to Home

Hunger is a **real** problem for Wisconsin families. Statewide, over 560,000 people live in households that are food insecure¹ — they do not always have enough food for an active, healthy life.

This represents **8.9% of Wisconsin households**, or almost 1 in 11.²

What does “food insecurity” mean?

Food insecurity happens at different levels. **Food secure** households have enough food at all times for an active healthy life.

Households with **low food security** have uncertain access to food. They may worry about having enough food. Or they may need to juggle what little money they have to meet basic needs such as rent, medicine and food.

Households with **very low food security** have a more severe situation — household members may reduce the amount of food they eat because they cannot afford what they need.

How many people are food insecure?

In the most recent 3-year period reported, 2004 to 2006:³

- Almost 1 in 11 (8.9 percent) of Wisconsin households experienced low food security — representing over 560,000 people.
- 2.7 percent of households experienced very low food security.

Food insecure 8.9%
 2.7% — very low food security
 6.2% — low food security



Who is most at risk?

While hungry families live throughout the state, some households at greatest risk are:⁴

- Headed by a **single mother**
- **Poor** (See the poverty guidelines on page 2.)
- **African American**
- Those with a **disabled** household member
- Living in the **inner city**

Food insecurity in Wisconsin
 Rates among households with selected characteristics, 1996-2000



Need for help is growing

Relative to other states, Wisconsin households have become more food insecure. And the problem is growing—Wisconsin was one of 15 states to show a statistically significant increase in its food insecurity rate, according to a recent measure.⁵

People are also seeking more food assistance. For example, participation in the Food Stamp program (now called FoodShare in Wisconsin) is on the rise. In Wisconsin, participation more than doubled between October 1999 and October 2007.⁶ This recent increase has been among the **highest in the nation.**

Use of food pantries and other emergency food outlets continues to rise. Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin reported serving 34% more people in 2005, compared to 2001.⁷ And the Foodbank’s food distribution increased as well — to nearly 4 million pounds of food in 2005, up 30% over the previous year.⁸

Why are people hungry?

Poverty

Poverty is closely linked to hunger. The federal government uses income guidelines to determine the poverty level. For example, in 2008, a family of four with a yearly income of \$21,200 or less was considered **poor** — living in poverty.

Nearly a third (31 percent) of poor households in Wisconsin are food insecure.

Many people with incomes above the federal poverty line are still considered “low-income.” In 2008, a **low-income** family of four made less than \$39,200. Statewide in 2006, 24 percent of households were low-income — yearly income below 185 percent of the federal poverty line.

While poverty is strongly related to food insecurity, not all poor households are food insecure. Many people use assistance programs such as Food Stamps and housing assistance to have enough money for food.

Percent of population below poverty level in Wisconsin in 1999
Census 2000*



*Poverty data for all Wisconsin counties is currently only available from the 2000 Census. About one-third of Wisconsin counties (those with larger populations) do have more recent data available. See page 4 for the latest poverty data for your county.

And not all food insecure households are poor. In fact, 65 percent of Wisconsin’s food insecure households have incomes above the poverty line.

Number of Wisconsin FoodShare (Food Stamp) recipients

October monthly totals 1995–2007



Limited access to food

Limited access to food may also contribute to food insecurity. Rural residents may face transportation challenges as they try to get to distant grocery stores. Recent increases in the price of gasoline exacerbate this challenge.

Inner city residents may face similar access problems. A report by Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee found that in general, stores in an economically distressed, inner-city area have fewer products and higher prices than stores outside the area.⁹

A recent national study found that when there was at least one supermarket nearby, residents ate more fruits and vegetables.¹⁰

Finally, recent rapid increases in the cost of food mean that low-income families are struggling even harder to keep food on the table.

Limited access to and participation in food assistance programs

These limitations act as barriers to food security. For example, the nation's largest food assistance program is the Food Stamp Program, which helps low-income people buy food. Yet, only 59 percent of Wisconsin residents that appear to be eligible for the program actually participate, compared to 65 percent nationally.¹¹

What are the barriers to participating in food assistance programs?

Confusion/lack of awareness

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) identified confusion and lack of awareness of program rules as key barriers to participating in the Food Stamp program.¹²

Difficulties applying

America's Second Harvest found more than a third (35 percent) of their food pantry clients had not applied for Food Stamps because it was too much hassle.

To improve accessibility, Wisconsin's Food Stamp program (called FoodShare) provides online information that allows individuals to estimate their eligibility, submit an application online and check the status of their benefits.¹³

You can learn more about FoodShare participation in your county on the next page.

Lack of programs

Government-subsidized free and reduced-price school meals are important programs in combating hunger. School breakfast and summer meal programs provide vital nutrition for low-income children before school or when school is out.

Wisconsin ranks among the **last in the nation** in access to school breakfast.¹⁴

- Just over half (60.6 percent) of Wisconsin schools that offer lunch programs also offer breakfast programs. (Only Connecticut ranks lower.)
- Just over one-third (35.7 percent) of low-income students who receive subsidized school lunch also receive school breakfast.

For specifics about the availability of school breakfast in your county, refer to *School Breakfast Programs* in this series.

Do food pantries help?

Food pantries and other emergency food outlets can play a key role in deterring hunger. These outlets are often volunteer-run, and receive significant amounts of donated food from communities.

Families who rely on emergency food outlets are food insecure, precisely because they have to use emergency food to meet their needs.

Initially, food pantries and soup kitchens were set up to provide for the unusual emergency need, such as when someone lost a job or became ill. Unfortunately, the need to rely on emergency food outlets has become a chronic situation for many people.

In one Wisconsin county, 43 percent of food pantry users visited a pantry once a month, and 37 percent had been getting food from a food pantry for 2 years or more. Approximately one in five (21 percent) reported getting most of their food from pantries and free meal sites.¹⁵

What else do we know about Wisconsin food pantry clients?¹⁶

- Almost half (44 percent) have at least one employed person in their household.
- Almost half (43 percent) have at least one child under age 18.
- One-third (33 percent) are single parents.
- Nearly one-fourth (24 percent) report having a long-term disability or health problem that limits their ability to work.



How does Vernon County fare?

Much like comparing poverty rates, we can look at other clues related to whether people have enough to eat. Such county information might include local economic data and participation in food assistance programs.

You can find detailed county data like the following examples and more on the Wisconsin Food Security Project web site: www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs



Population in poverty (Data from 2000 U.S. Census)

	Vernon County	Wisconsin
Total population	28,056	5,363,675
Poverty rate	14.2%	8.7%
Percent of population with income below 185% of poverty	32.5%	20.9%

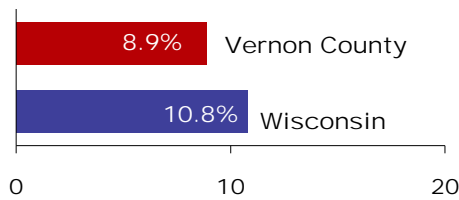
Self-sufficiency standard¹⁷ (Full-time hourly wage)

Estimates how much income a family would need to cover basic costs such as housing, food, child care, health care, transportation, and taxes—without public or private assistance.

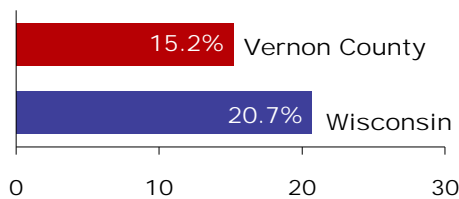
	Vernon County	Wisconsin**	County rank*
Single working adult, one preschool-aged child, one school-aged child	\$11.91	\$14.14	66
Two working adults, one preschool-aged child, one school-aged child	\$7.24/adult	\$9.54/adult	66

FoodShare (Food Stamp) Program participation¹⁸

Percent of entire population receiving FoodShare, 2007



Percent of child population receiving FoodShare, 2007



In Vernon County, 2,496 people received FoodShare in 2007.

* Counties are ranked from 1 to 72. Rank 1 always indicates the highest number. For some data, a high number is desirable whereas for other indicators, a low number is desirable.

** Average self-sufficiency wage across Wisconsin counties.

What are some effects of hunger?

In addition to not having enough food, hunger and food insecurity are linked to other problems. For children, for example, negative outcomes related to food insecurity include:¹⁹

- Poor health
- Behavior problems
- Learning and academic problems

How can you help?

Aside from familiar activities such as food drives and hunger walks, communities work to prevent hunger in a variety of ways. The Wisconsin Food Security Consortium has developed an action plan that offers an extensive list of ideas to help eliminate hunger in Wisconsin (see www.wisconsinfoodsecurityconsortium.org).

Here are some ideas:

- Participate in or create a local hunger task force.
- Help build awareness of hunger in your community.
- Improve access to grocery stores.
- Talk to your local school about starting a breakfast program.
- Help start a summer meal program for children when school is out.

Learn more about hunger and the issues that affect your county at the Wisconsin Food Security Consortium (www.wisconsinfoodsecurityconsortium.org) and at the Wisconsin Food Security Project (www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs).

Notes

- ¹ Nord, Mark. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing data from 2004 through 2006. 2008.
- ² Nord, Mark, Margaret Andrews and Steven Carlson. November 2007. *Household Food Security in the United States*, 2006. USDA/ERS Economic Research Report ERR-49. 66 pp.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Bartfeld, Judith, and Cecile David. 2003. *Food Insecurity in Wisconsin*, 1996–2000. University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty. Special Report No. 86: www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/sr/pdfs/sr86.pdf
- ⁵ Nord, *Household Food Security* (see note 2).
- ⁶ Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services—Eligibility Management: dhfs.wisconsin.gov/em/rsdata
- ⁷ Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin. *2006 Hunger in America Study*. www.secondharvestmadison.org/about/hunger.html
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee. *Hunger in Milwaukee: Some Food for Thought*.
- ¹⁰ Morland, K., et al. Neighborhood characteristics associated with the location of food stores and food service places. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 2002. 22:23–29

- ¹¹ USDA. 2007. *Reaching Those in Need: State Food Stamp Participation Rates in 2005*. www.fns.usda.gov/OANE/MENU/Published/FSP/FILES/Participation/Reaching2005.pdf
- ¹² U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. 2001. *The Decline in Food Stamp Participation: A Report to Congress*. Nutrition Assistance Research Report Series. Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation. Food Stamp Program Report No. FSP-01-WEL.
- ¹³ State of Wisconsin, Access to Eligibility Support Services for Health and Nutrition, access.wisconsin.gov
- ¹⁴ Food Research and Action Center. 2007. *School Breakfast Scorecard: 2007*. www.frac.org/pdf/SBP_2007.pdf
- ¹⁵ Hunger Prevention Council of Dane County, Inc. (Wisconsin). 2004. *Survey of Users of Dane County's Food Pantries During October 2003*: www.madison.com/communities/hpcdc/library/files/SurveyReport03_II.doc
- ¹⁶ Bartfeld, Judith. 2000. *Summary of Findings from the Wisconsin Survey of Food Pantry Clients*: www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/files/fdpntsvy.pdf
- ¹⁷ Pearce, Diana, and Jennifer Brooks. 2004. *The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Wisconsin*. Education Fund of the Wisconsin Women's Network: www.wiwomensnetwork.org/selfsuffbody2004.pdf.
- ¹⁸ Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services—Eligibility Management: dhfs.wisconsin.gov/em/rsdata
- ¹⁹ Center on Hunger and Poverty, Brandeis University. 2002. *The Consequences of Hunger and Food Insecurity for Children: Evidence from Recent Scientific Studies*: www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/ConsequencesofHunger.pdf

Hunger Close to Home is the first in the series *Wisconsin Families and the Communities Where They Live and Work*. The complete list of titles is found on the UW-Extension Family Living web site at: www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/demographics.

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Author: Kadi Row, food security specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Production team: Cooperative Extension Publishing, Applied Population Lab and Family Living Programs staff.

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Revised August 2008