

## **Family Living Programs**

### **Communities Document Food Insecurity and Hunger**

#### **Situation**

Food security—the assured access to enough food for a healthy, active life—is vital to the wellbeing of children. Yet, twelve percent of households with elementary school age children in Wisconsin experience food insecurity—around twice the rate found among childless households.<sup>i</sup> Food insecurity in Wisconsin is less common than nationwide, but Wisconsin’s ranking relative to other states has been slipping over the past decade.

Food insecurity is troubling for a variety of reasons. At the most immediate level, children in food-insecure households experience disruptions in their eating habits. National studies show that eighty-one percent of parents in food-insecure households reported relying on only a few kinds of low-cost foods to feed their children; 52 percent reported that they couldn’t afford to feed their children balanced meals; and one-quarter reported that they couldn’t afford to give the children enough to eat.<sup>ii</sup> Food insecurity also puts children at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes. Compared to their peers in food-secure households, children in food-insecure households have worse math and reading scores, demonstrate poorer social skills, have more behavior problems, and experience worse health outcomes.<sup>iii</sup>

Although food insecurity is clearly a problem in Wisconsin, little is known about how food insecurity varies within the state. Because of this, many assume that food insecurity and hunger are not problems in their own communities. And, despite the harmful effects of food insecurity on children, schools have not had reliable information about the extent of hunger and food insecurity among their students. Measuring food insecurity in local communities is difficult, because existing measurement methods require administering detailed surveys to a broad cross-section of the population. It would be useful for particular counties, communities, or schools to find out about the extent of food insecurity in their midst, so that they can develop appropriate remedies.

#### **Response**

To help schools and communities get a better picture of hunger and food insecurity, University of Wisconsin-Extension developed a simple survey for elementary school children to bring home to their parents. This survey includes a shortened version of the official food security scale used by the Census Bureau. It also includes questions about participation in food and nutrition assistance programs, and about sources of food and whether children miss meals. County UW-Extension educators work with local elementary schools to distribute the surveys, and researchers analyze the data and provide information back to the schools.

#### **Outcomes**

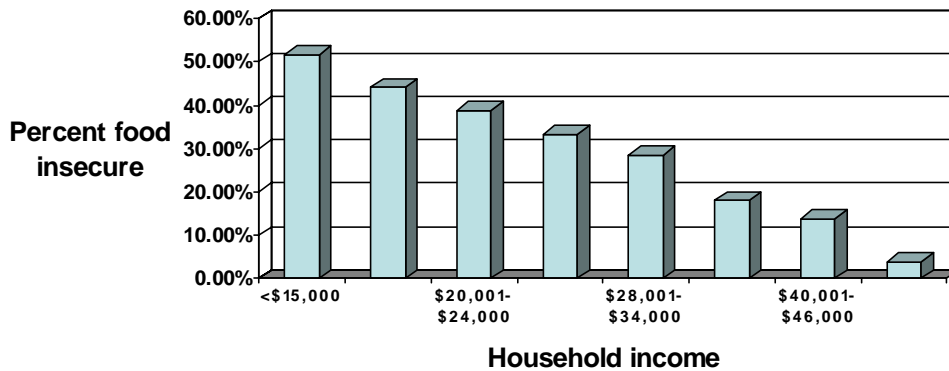
##### **Understanding Hunger**

Since 2003, 70 elementary schools serving children in 23 Wisconsin counties in all parts of the state have participated in the Wisconsin Schools Food Security Survey. As a result, these schools have learned new, often surprising, information about the prevalence of food insecurity in their community.

Among participating schools, the average food insecurity rate was 22 percent, ranging from 7 percent to 36 percent across schools.

Results can help to dispel some misconceptions about hunger and its causes. For instance, while food insecurity is most common among the lowest income children, even children in moderate-income households risk food insecurity. And, 77 percent of food-insecure households have one or more fulltime workers.

**Percent of Households with Elementary School Children Who Are Food Insecure, Based on School Survey Sample**



The school surveys are also providing new information about community characteristics that help lessen the risk of food insecurity and hunger. Lower housing costs, proximity to supermarkets, and access to public transportation appear to help families maintain food security. These findings can help provide guidance to communities seeking strategies to reduce food insecurity and hunger.

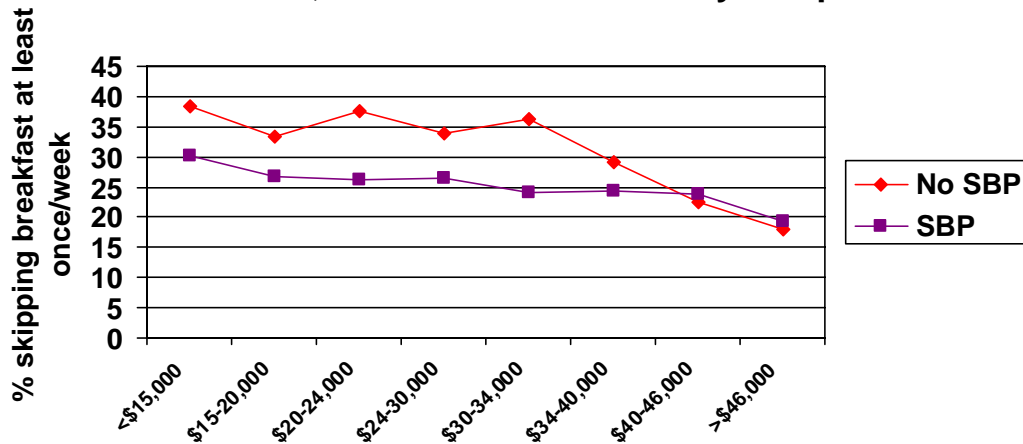
### **Public Awareness**

Information about hunger at the local level has generated substantial media interest, including newspaper, radio, and television coverage. Media attention helps to raise public awareness of hunger, reminding communities that hunger continues to exist in our midst.

### **Improving Access to School Breakfast**

The survey provides new information about participation in the School Breakfast Program, and the potential benefits of school breakfast. Schools learned that children frequently skipped breakfast in the morning—26 percent of parents reported their child skipped breakfast at least once in a typical week—and some schools have used this information to support implementing the School Breakfast Program. Other schools are exploring the feasibility of serving breakfast, or of improving breakfast programs to make them more attractive. Results show that both low-income and moderate-income children are less likely to skip breakfast if their school participates in the School Breakfast Program. This kind of information can be helpful in encouraging more schools to offer breakfast.

**Percent of Elementary School Children Who Skip Breakfast, Based on School Survey Sample**



**New Initiatives**

Findings from the survey have stimulated a variety of other local initiatives.

- UW-Extension educators in one district formed a workgroup to help communities address hunger;
- Survey results were a catalyst for creation of a new food pantry that distributed 164,000 pounds of food in its first 10 months;
- Some schools have begun outreach efforts to ensure that families know about available food assistance programs;
- Some schools have begun to explore ways to enhance nutritional quality of meals served at school.

**New Research Tools**

The survey offers a feasible, cost-effective option for other communities interested in measuring food security. Working with colleagues at the USDA and Cornell University, UW-Extension researchers have found that the school surveys are a reliable and valid measure of food insecurity.

**Contact**

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<sup>i</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>ii</sup> Nord, M. (2003b). "Food Insecurity in Households with Children." Food and Rural Economics Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. 34-13.  
<sup>iii</sup> Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2003; Winicki and Jemison 2003; "Food Insecurity Affects School Children's Academic Performance, Weight Gain, and Social Skills" by Diana Jyoti, Edward A. Frongillo, and Sonya J. Jones, published in *Journal of Nutrition*, December 2005.