

# FOOD SECURITY - A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH, FEBRUARY 2005

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## SITUATION

Hunger and food insecurity are real problems for Wisconsin families. Statewide, approximately 540,000 people live in households that are food insecure<sup>i</sup>—they do not have access at all times to enough food for an active healthy life. This means one out of every eleven Wisconsin households is food insecure.

Households with children experience food insecurity at more than double the rate of households without children. Households with other characteristics are at particularly high risk, including poor households (31% are food insecure), households headed by a single mother (33%), households in which somebody is disabled (24%), households in central cities (15%), and households headed by African Americans (30%). Among households with all of these risk factors, the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity is almost 75%.

One subpopulation at risk, participants in the WIC program, has been surveyed specifically to determine their food security status. In 2002, 44% of Wisconsin WIC families surveyed were identified as food insecure, and 19% of the families were food insecure with hunger. 30% said that in the last 12 months, they or another family member or adult in the household had cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money to buy food. 45% noted that the food they bought just didn't last and they didn't have money to buy more. 42% noted they couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

Food insecurity is a complex problem and stems from many sources. Poverty certainly plays a role. Not surprisingly, poor households—whether employed or unemployed—are more likely than others to struggle to meet their basic needs. According to 2000 Census data, 8.7 percent of Wisconsin citizens and 10.8 percent of Wisconsin children live in poverty. In many more households, incomes are considered above the poverty line, but are still low enough to qualify families for government assistance programs such as food stamps and Badgercare health insurance. In total, over one-fifth of our population, or more than one million Wisconsin citizens, are considered to be in poverty or low income.

On the other hand, food insecurity is not limited to either the poor or the unemployed—65% of food insecure households have income above the poverty line. Almost three-quarters of food-insecure households in Wisconsin have at least one worker, including more than half with a full-time worker. A UW-Extension survey of food pantry clients found that 44% of client households had at least one worker.

There are indications that the situations faced by low-income families may be getting worse. Statewide unemployment rates are increasing—5.6 percent in 2003 compared to 3.0 percent in 1999<sup>ii</sup>. Relative to other states, Wisconsin households have become more food insecure and hungry<sup>iii</sup>. People are also seeking more food assistance. For example, participation in the food stamp program (now called FoodShare in Wisconsin) increased 82% between Oct 1999 and October 2004<sup>iv</sup>. This increase ranks among the largest in the nation. And emergency food providers, such as food pantries, report that demand is at an all-time high.

Wisconsin continues to rank at the bottom nationally for participation in School Breakfast programs. Less than half (47%) of Wisconsin schools that offer lunch programs also offer breakfast programs. Only a quarter (25%) of low-income students who receive subsidized school lunch also receive school breakfast<sup>v</sup>.

Food insecurity can be offset when there are strong and widely used nutrition assistance programs, like food stamps, school breakfast, and summer feeding programs. However, the role played by these programs varies greatly around the state, and many low-income people either don't have access to or don't use valuable assistance programs. For instance, the share of low-income children who attend a school that offers breakfast ranges from 0 to 100%, and the share of people who participate in the food stamp program in Wisconsin is between 50% and 60% of those that are eligible; and this participation rate varies dramatically from county to county.

Ready access to affordable food is also important, and this too varies among communities. An important trend in Wisconsin is the growth of local food security coalitions seeking to increase awareness of hunger and food insecurity, and to identify and alleviate barriers.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WNEP

Understanding characteristics of food security, including trends, characteristics of food-insecure persons, and the barriers to food security, can help us design and deliver effective nutrition education programs.

There are several program options for counties:

**Assessing food insecurity and poverty.** Accurate local information about the status of food insecurity and poverty can improve planning and help to target education activities. Resources include:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs/index.cfm>

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/efan02013.pdf>

<http://www.wiwomensnetwork.org/selfsuffstd.html>

**Increasing awareness.** Education programs can increase public awareness of food insecurity, including the factors that put families and communities at risk. Dispelling misconceptions and building awareness about the face of hunger and poverty can improve the success of local efforts to address these problems. Resources include:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/demographics/hunger.cfm>

**Increasing awareness, availability and accessibility of local nutrition assistance programs.** Families need accurate information about assistance programs and services that can help in times of need. Counties can likewise take steps to increase accessibility of programs such as school breakfast and summer food.

**Education for families and individuals.** Educators can provide knowledge and skills needed to help families and individuals better manage their food resources. Recent research has revealed that low-income households who have learned new skills and can apply them as new food shopping practices can improve their dietary intakes. Educational programs that teach family members to look for grocery specials, use a grocery shopping list, and plan meals ahead of time have been shown to make a difference in the diets of the participating families.

**Working with community coalitions.** Many counties have local coalitions to address issues of food insecurity. Key stakeholders can bring together information, resources and skills to conduct assessments and address problems, and Extension can play a vital role.

<sup>i</sup> Nord, Mark. US Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing data from 2001-2003. 2004.

<sup>ii</sup> Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Local Area Unemployment Statistics

<sup>iii</sup> Sullivan, Ashley F., and Choi Eunyoung. 2002. *Hunger and Food Insecurity in the Fifty States: 1998-2000*. Brandeis University, Center on Hunger and Poverty: <http://www.centeronhunger.org/pdf/statedata98-00.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. Eligibility Management Data Warehouse.

<sup>v</sup> Food Research and Action Center. 2004. *School Breakfast Scorecard: 2004*.