

Food Insecurity: Family Problem, Community Challenge



Megan Ward, Courtesy of First Harvest

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Washington State has long struggled with high rates of food insecurity. From 1997 to 2001 Washington had the second highest rate of very low food security, or hunger, in the United States. National food security data from 2004 to 2006 show significant improvement, but 88,000 households still experienced very low food security in 2006, with an additional 250,000 households in Washington experiencing low food security (*see definitions in box*).

Washington isn't unique. Many states in the Pacific Northwest reflect similar situations. Although much improved in recent years, Oregon repeatedly had one of the highest hunger rates in the nation in the late 1990s. Washington's other Northwest neighbors—Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and Alaska—also struggle with high food insecurity rates.

Food insecurity is most often the result of poverty. High housing costs, low wages, frequent moving, and high tax burdens on low-income households are some of the factors identified by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) that influence food insecurity. Households with children, especially those headed by single women, are at increased risk, as are African American, Hispanic, and Native American households.

Food insecurity creates public health problems

Hunger and food insecurity challenge the well-being of children, adults, families, and communities. Research has shown that pregnant women who are malnourished are more likely to

give birth to low-birth-weight babies. Once born, children who experience hunger and food insecurity are more likely to have behavioral problems, do poorly in school, require more medical care and hospitalizations, and develop chronic diseases as adults. Children who live in food insecure households also have poorer health-related quality of life.

Hunger and food insecurity aren't just problems for children. Among the elderly, food insecurity exacerbates acute chronic diseases and speeds the onset of degenerative diseases, leading to decreased quality and length of life.

Ironically, food insecurity and obesity can coexist in the same household and even the same individual, particularly for women. Although this paradox is not completely understood, several factors are likely at play. Research on coping strategies among food-insecure households, for example, shows that trade-offs are often made between food quantity and food quality. When money and resources for food are stretched, low-income families and individuals may buy cheaper, less nutritious food (often higher in fat and sugar) to maximize calories in order to stave off hunger.

Obesity could also be a response to cyclic supplies of food. When money or resources are available for food (usually in the beginning of the month), family members may overeat to compensate for when food is unavailable. And finally, community research at the zip code level has found that obesity rates are higher in areas that have lower property values. These less affluent areas often lack access to fresh, affordable produce and other nutritious foods.

The physical, mental, and socio-emotional effects of hunger and food insecurity are enough to cause immense concern, but they also come

Photo: Young client and mother visit food bank's weekly "Baby Day" service.

Food Insecurity Defined

Food insecurity is a household-level, economic and social condition of limited access to food.

Food secure households have access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.

Low food security (formerly referred to as *food insecure*) households have no reduced food intake, but reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet.

In **very low food security** (formerly referred to as *hungry*) households, normal eating patterns of one or more household members are disrupted, and food intake is reduced at times because of insufficient money or other resources for food.

Source: US Department of Agriculture.

with a considerable financial burden on society as a whole. A recent analysis by Dr. Larry Brown (Harvard School of Public Health) and his colleagues estimates the total cost of hunger to US households, communities, businesses, and the government to be \$90 billion a year. Add that to the cost of obesity (approximately \$75 billion per year, according to estimates by RTI International and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), and you have a pretty hefty price communities pay for these major public health challenges.

Key areas for policy action

Key solutions to the public health consequences of hunger and food insecurity are to strengthen food assistance programs and improve the economic security of low-income families and individuals.

Increase funding for food assistance

USDA funds numerous food assistance programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Food Stamp Program, and various school meal programs. These programs have far-reaching effects. The Food Stamp Program, in particular, has been shown to increase food spending and household income.

Participation in the School Breakfast Program affects students' test scores, cognitive ability, and memory. Food assistance programs may also help reduce the risk of obesity. A study of school-aged food-insecure girls, for example, found that those who participated in the school meal programs and the Food Stamp Program had a lower risk of being overweight.

The majority of funding for food assistance programs comes from the federal government. However, this funding is not enough to ensure that all eligible families and individuals can participate and receive adequate benefits. Programs need to be available in local communities, and program locations and hours of operation must meet working families' needs. Also, families need to be aware of the programs and have accurate information about program benefits, eligibility, and application guidelines. Decreasing the administrative red tape is also important, to make applying for and receiving benefits easier.

Access to and funding for federal food programs is an area of considerable emphasis for the Children's Alliance, a statewide, nonprofit child advocacy organization. As part of its End Childhood Hunger Project, it is engaging a broad group of stakeholders to develop a long-term plan to end childhood hunger in Washington. In addition to state and local anti-hunger advocates, key targets for implementation of the plan include

policy makers in state and local government, state program administrators, the media, and the general public.

Increase access to healthy food

In a just food system, everyone—rich and poor—would have equal access to nutritious, reasonably priced foods. However, low-income neighborhoods often lack the kinds of natural foods grocery stores found in higher-income areas. Sometimes low-income neighborhoods lack any kind of grocery store at all. Changes in public policy that increase access to local farmers markets, for example, could help ensure that low-income households have the same choices that are available to their more well-to-do counterparts. Securing funds to attract grocery stores to underserved communities is another avenue to help close the food gap.

Boost economic support for low-income households

Although food assistance programs are important for reducing hunger and food insecurity, the fundamental cause of hunger—poverty—must also be addressed. The high cost of living, coupled with rising health insurance costs, forces many low-income families and individuals to live from paycheck to paycheck. When times are tight, some families and individuals have to make the choice between paying for heat and medicine or paying for food.

Food assistance programs, along with other public assistance programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, can play a critical role in lifting people out of poverty. Food assistance programs alone, however, cannot end hunger or poverty. People need job opportunities that offer a living wage and access to good-quality, affordable housing, health care, and child care.

The costs of hunger and obesity affect all of us. Public health professionals and their academic colleagues are well-placed to promote policy and systemic changes that will help ensure that all families have access to healthy, affordable food choices. Strengthening the nation's anti-hunger safety net and improving access to nutritious food are critical steps toward eliminating hunger, food insecurity, and obesity. We must also look beyond food assistance programs and advocate for smart changes in economic support programs to help lift families and individuals out of poverty.

Creating a just food system in every community will take a coordinated, comprehensive effort as well as targeted public policy advocacy at the local, state, and national levels. Communities and individuals will reap the benefits of this effort. ■

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Author

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Resources

Children's Alliance.
www.childrensalliance.org
Food Research and Action Center. www.frac.org