

Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island

2007

The Economic Roots of Hunger



The root cause of hunger is poverty. Today in Rhode Island, 11.1 percent of the population has income below the official poverty level, meaning that 114,000 people are living in poverty, including 35,000 children and 12,000 senior adults.¹

Many people living in poverty work at low-wage jobs. For example, a single parent with two children who works full time for \$7.40 per hour (the Rhode Island minimum wage) earns only \$15,392 per year, which is still below the poverty line.

2007 Poverty Guidelines²

Size of Family Unit	Annual Income Limit
1	\$10,210
2	\$13,690
3	\$17,170
4	\$20,650
5	\$24,130

The federal poverty guidelines are based solely on income and family size. Therefore, the national designation of poverty does not take into account the high cost of living in Rhode Island. Among low-income households in our state, 48 percent spend more than a third of their earnings on housing.³ For some, housing costs consume a much greater proportion of take-home pay, since the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Providence is now \$1,115 per month (\$13,380 per year).⁴ Certainly, the unsettling news about the subprime mortgage crisis has spotlighted the difficulties of low-income families holding on to their homes. Steep mortgage payments or high rents can use up a family's financial resources. By the end of the month, there's no money left to purchase food.

Monthly Budget for a Single Parent with Two Children (ages 3 and 9) Earning \$9.98 per Hour⁵ (125% of the Federal Poverty Level in 2006)

Income:		
Take home pay	After taxes (accounting for earned income credit, child tax credit and child care credit)	\$1,944
Expenses:		
Rent	Fair market rent for two-bedroom apartment in Providence (includes heat)	\$965
Transportation	Gas, vehicle expense (excludes vehicle purchase)	\$324
Child Care	With child care subsidy	\$17
Health Care	With Rite Care	\$0
Miscellaneous	Telephone, clothing, non-food household items	\$360
Remaining for food		\$278

According to the USDA, in order to purchase an adequate moderate-cost diet, a three-person household should spend at least \$571 per month on food. With just \$278 remaining in the household budget, the parent in the above scenario can only afford to purchase 15 days worth of food each month.⁶

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank produced this report to document the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the state. We examine the economic roots of hunger as well as the growing demand for emergency food and the need to better utilize government-sponsored nutrition programs.

Major Findings of the Report...

- 5 Hunger impacts every community in Rhode Island affecting thousands of individuals and families.
- 5 There has been a significant increase in those who cite hunger and food insecurity as problems in their lives.
- 5 Due to low wages and the high cost of living, working families with children struggle. They now make up one-third of those served by emergency food pantries and soup kitchens.
- 5 The RI Community Food Bank distributes food to more than 150 emergency food programs that provide millions of meals each year. The increased demand strains the emergency food network.
- 5 Government-sponsored nutrition programs, particularly food stamps, are underutilized and fail to reach many of those in need.
- 5 By making better use of federal nutrition programs – the Food Stamp Program, WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), National School Lunch, School Breakfast, the Summer Food Service Program and CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program) – Rhode Island can help its low-income residents stretch their food budgets and, at the same time, bring millions of taxpayer dollars back into the state's economy.

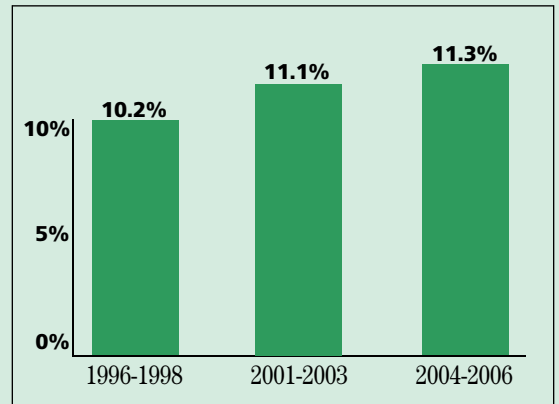
The Prevalence of Food Insecurity & Hunger in Rhode Island

“Food insecurity” is a measure of the lack of access to adequate food. Researchers use the term to refer to households on the brink of persistent hunger – families that must cut the size of meals, skip meals altogether, or run out of food due to financial constraints.

Each year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the United States Census Bureau conduct a national survey of food insecurity and hunger. Families considered food insecure are those that cannot buy enough to meet the basic food needs of household members. When they decrease the amount they consume, so that family members go without eating and experience hunger, then households are classified as having “very low food security.”

The upward trend of hunger has become a portent of a larger social problem. Based on results averaged over a three-year period, from 2004 to 2006, 11.3 percent of all households in Rhode Island (approximately 48,000) were food insecure and 3.7 percent reported very low food security. This represents an increase from the previous measurement periods, 2001-2003, when 11.1 percent of households statewide were food insecure and 1996-1998, when 10.2 percent were food insecure.⁷

The growth in food insecurity in Rhode Island is a matter of crucial concern for everyone. Hunger threatens the health of vulnerable children and senior adults. Researchers at urban medical centers in the U.S. found that food-insecure children had nearly a one-third greater chance of being hospitalized than food-secure children.⁸ Similarly, food-insecure senior adults were found to lack critical nutrients in their diets resulting in adverse health outcomes.⁹ This evidence demonstrates that inadequate nutrition leads to health problems and highlights the disproportionate impact of hunger on children and the elderly poor.



Growth in Food Insecurity Among all Households in Rhode Island

Emergency Food Programs

The charitable response to the problem of hunger in Rhode Island is impressive. Across the state, there are over 150 emergency food providers, including food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters operating with the help of hundreds of caring volunteers.

Most emergency food programs receive low-cost or donated food from the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. The Food Bank distributed over seven million pounds of food to these agencies in the past year, allowing them to provide over 8 million meals to people in need. The majority of the food distributed by the Food Bank is donated by generous individuals and businesses. However, the Food Bank also purchases food at low-cost to meet the demand of emergency programs. This year, the Rhode Island General Assembly provided \$384,041 in grant funding to the Food Bank for food purchasing – \$100,000 more than in the previous year.

Hungry clients seeking emergency food assistance do not always fit the stereotype. Only a small percentage is homeless adults. The majority are low-income individuals and families that pay rent but cannot afford adequate food. In fact, one-third of those served by emergency food programs in Rhode Island are families with children.¹⁰ Sadly, even soup kitchens regularly report serving children.

Experienced emergency food providers realize these needy families seek sustenance in addition to food. Their clients have multiple financial, social, and health problems. They struggle to pay medical bills, utility bills, and rent. Of those seeking emergency food assistance in Rhode Island, 32 percent had to choose between purchasing food and paying for medical care; 46 percent had to decide between buying food and paying their utility bills.¹¹



Most people facing hunger can also benefit from financial and fuel assistance, job training, counseling, and better access to health care and child care. Emergency food providers can serve as a primary point of contact and as a resource to direct clients to other services. For example, the Poverello Center in Providence combines a food pantry and a free health care clinic at one site. In Westerly, providers from different agencies have organized a Basic Needs Network to share resources and coordinate services. Because emergency food providers get to know their repeat clients well, they can ease the anxiety and fear to help them overcome the stigma of accepting assistance and applying for benefits.



Federal Nutrition Programs

The federal government maintains several major food assistance programs including the Food Stamp Program, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), National School Lunch, School Breakfast, the Summer Food Service Program, and CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program). While funded by the federal government, these programs are administered by different state agencies: Food Stamps by the Department of Human Services; WIC by the Department of Health; School Meals, the Summer Food Service Program and CACFP by the Department of Education.

Food Stamps

Food stamps provide eligible Rhode Island households with an average benefit of \$197 per month.¹² Restricted to food purchases, food stamp benefits can greatly improve the nutrition of all family members and significantly reduce the financial burden of low-income households.

Unfortunately, many eligible people in Rhode Island are not enrolled. Our state now ranks 44th among the states in Food Stamp program participation. In 2005 (the latest year for which statistics are available), only 56 percent of those who were eligible participated.¹³ This represented 73,000 people.¹⁴ Many potential participants perceive themselves as ineligible for food stamps because they have earned income. According to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Rhode Island, these low-income working families have very high rates of food insecurity and would benefit from government assistance.¹⁵ Similarly, the USDA reports that food stamp participation among the eligible working poor in Rhode Island is just 42 percent.¹⁶

Efforts are underway to improve food stamp participation. This year's state budget includes \$100,000 for the University of Rhode Island's Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America to conduct outreach and marketing to increase enrollment. In order to make it easier to apply, Rhode Island launched an online food stamp application in 2007. Signing up is now accessible and available at www.foodstamps.ri.gov. The Department of Human Services also lowered the percentage of improper denials and terminations of food stamp benefits, receiving a "most improved" award from the USDA in 2007. Through these combined efforts, participation in the Food Stamp Program increased by 5,500 people from August 2006 to August 2007.



WIC

WIC is a health education and nutrition program serving pregnant women and parents with children up to age five. WIC participants receive supplemental foods, nutrition education, and referrals to health care. In Rhode Island, the average monthly benefit is \$39 per participant.¹⁷ From June through October each year, WIC provides additional checks to participating families to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at local farmers' markets. There were approximately 25,000 WIC participants in August 2007, a 7.5 percent increase from the previous year.¹⁸

Summer Meals

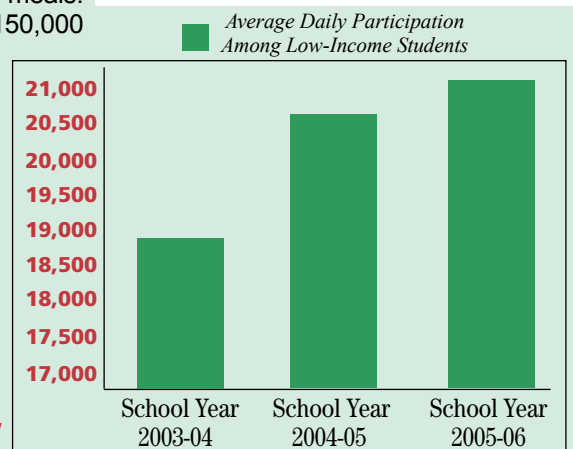
The Summer Food Service Program helps children in low-income communities receive nutritious food when school is not in session. The USDA provides funding to reimburse sponsors for meals served to children at summer programs. In 2006, the program served 12,000 children at 170 sites across Rhode Island. At this level, summer meals only reach 27 percent of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches during the school year.²²

School Meals

Over 400 elementary, middle, and high schools in Rhode Island participate in both the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. Based on household income, families can apply for free or reduced-cost school meals. Approximately 48,000 students are signed up for this program out of 150,000 total students statewide.¹⁹ Participation in **School Breakfast** among low-income students has steadily increased over the past few years.

Even though breakfast participation has improved, for every 100 students served free or reduced-price lunch, only 44 receive School Breakfast.²⁰ This low level of student participation occurs despite Rhode Island's mandate that every public school provide a breakfast meal. One way to boost participation is to offer breakfast free of charge to all students. Research has shown that "universal" breakfast programs reduce the shame associated with school breakfast programs targeted specifically to poor children. A policy of breakfast-for-all attracts more students and leads to improved grades, behavior and attendance.²¹

School Breakfast Participation in Rhode Island



Meals at After-School Programs

CACFP provides federal reimbursement for meals served to youth in after-school programs, young children in day care, and seniors in adult day programs. As part of CACFP, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank prepares and distributes over 80,000 meals each year at 12 after-school programs in Newport, North Providence, and Providence. Known as Kids Cafe, and based on a national program model developed by America's Second Harvest, its goal is to provide healthy meals and snacks to children at local sites that offer high quality activities and supervision. In addition to good food, Kids Cafe also provides age-appropriate nutrition education to participating children.

Supporting Local Economies

According to the Tax Foundation, Rhode Island ranked 31st among the states in the return on federal tax dollars in fiscal year 2004, the latest year that statistics are available. Rhode Island's return on every tax dollar its residents sent to the IRS steadily decreased between 2000 and 2004.²³

Fiscal Year	Federal Spending Received per Dollar of Tax Paid	Rhode Island State Rank
2000	\$1.15	22
2001	\$1.07	29
2002	\$1.05	30
2003	\$1.06	29
2004	\$1.02	31

Federal spending received per dollar of federal tax paid in Rhode Island decreased between 2000 and 2004

Rhode Island is missing an opportunity to capture millions of federal dollars available through the Food Stamp Program. If food stamp participation increased from current levels to even 80 percent of those eligible (equaling the participation rate in Maine), our state would receive \$35 million in additional federal revenues. These new federal dollars would be spent in supermarkets and grocery stores, aiding the economy in the state's poorest neighborhoods.

Source of Additional Revenue for Rhode Island

Actual Food Stamp Benefits Fiscal Year 2006	Potential Food Stamp Benefits at 80 Percent Participation	Difference in Additional Federal Dollars to Rhode Island
\$81,000,000	\$116,000,000	\$35,000,000

Increased participation in the Food Stamp Program could bestow over \$35 million in increased federal revenues

Calling for Help

Rhode Island's 2-1-1 hotline provides information and referral for people in need. Professional counselors staff the hotline and connect callers to valuable benefits and services. Since its inception in June 2007, the hotline has received, on average, 7,800 calls per month, with the number of calls for food assistance growing each month.

In August 2007, Jane (not her real first name) called 2-1-1 in crisis after her husband abandoned her and her two young children. She was suddenly responsible for a home mortgage, tax payments and other household bills. Without child support, she was desperate because she did not have enough money to pay her bills and buy food.

The 2-1-1 call center counselor referred Jane to an emergency food pantry so that she could receive groceries for the week. The counselor also determined that Jane was eligible for food stamps and referred her to the Rhode Island Food Stamp Outreach Project to enroll. In addition, Jane was referred to the local Community Action agency for follow-up case management and to Rhode Island Housing to refinance her mortgage to an affordable payment. By calling 2-1-1, Jane connected to the immediate and long-term resources needed to feed and care for her family.



Rhode Island's Emergency Food Safety Net



The number indicated for each city or town is the total number of emergency food member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank in that location. Of the 39 cities and towns in Rhode Island, 26 host at least one of these emergency food sites.

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Summary

Thousands of people in Rhode Island experience hunger because they cannot afford adequate food. The combination of poverty-level wages and the high cost of living keeps many working families from being able to maintain a balanced diet with regular, nutritious meals. Over time, poor nutrition can cause serious medical problems. Hunger takes a significant toll on the health of children and senior adults, undercutting Rhode Island's investment in healthcare for low-income families and taxing the healthcare system for everyone.

The Food Bank and its member agencies are the primary source of hunger relief in Rhode Island. We are the state's safety net in providing healthy food and nutrition to all. As the prevalence of hunger increases, the Food Bank must now purchase food to supplement donations and grocery store salvage. Our emergency food network, established to provide temporary food assistance, strains to keep up with the demand created by growing food insecurity among low-income families in Rhode Island. While emergency food providers are committed to feeding every hungry person, no one wants to see children at soup kitchens.

The key to meeting the growing demand is to help hungry families maximize all available nutrition resources. This report documents how federal nutrition programs are underutilized in Rhode Island, despite the great strides that state government has taken to ease the application process. It is time to make better use of these federal programs that can be a source of nutritious food for thousands of low-income families and a source of federal revenue for the state.

Recommendations

- 1 Establish a statewide goal to increase food stamp enrollment to 80 percent of those who are eligible and bring an additional \$35 million in aid from Washington each year.
- 2 Engage community-based organizations, including schools, health centers, and social service agencies in reaching out to low-income families to promote the use of all available nutrition programs.
- 3 Provide breakfast to all students free of charge at schools where the majority of students are from low-income households.
- 4 Increase the number of after-school sites offering nutritious meals and snacks and provide nutrition education to participating children.
- 5 Develop the capacity of emergency food programs to act as an entryway to the federal nutrition programs and other critical services.
- 6 Increase both the quality and quantity of food distributed by the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.
- 7 Encourage healthy eating among food pantry clients and food stamp users through hands-on nutrition education.

RI Community Food Bank

The mission of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank is to provide quality food to people facing hunger through a network of certified member agencies. The Food Bank also provides leadership and information to promote citizen action, advance government nutrition assistance, and encourage private efforts aimed at developing effective solutions toward the elimination of hunger in Rhode Island. For more information, visit our website, www.rifoodbank.org.