

Hunger in America is on the Rise

A brief overview of important hunger and health issues currently facing our nation

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Food insecurity: USDA's measure of lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members

Hunger Facts

- 1 in 6 Americans does not have access to enough food
- Most individuals struggling with hunger are not homeless or out of work
- 17 million US children (1 in 4) do not have enough food
- Hunger has long-lasting, devastating effects on the health and development of children
- Many adults struggling with hunger are college educated

The past few years have been the most challenging for many Americans and while we are emerging from the worst recession in decades, hunger continues to rise at an alarming rate. Today, nearly 49 million people in America – almost 15 percent of US households – struggle to put food on their tables¹. The US Department of Agriculture, which began tracking food insecurity in 1995, reports that these numbers are the highest in the past fifteen years.

In Massachusetts, high unemployment and the subsequent loss of homes and savings has cut across all social classes. Hunger, once concentrated in low-income communities, is now spreading across the state, affecting the newly unemployed regardless of social status. With more than 600,000 Massachusetts residents struggling to feed their families, we are entering a new era of food insecurity. Massachusetts food banks and shelters have been stretched to capacity and are now serving about 9% of the state, a startling 23% increase over the past four years. Despite delivering 44 million pounds of food in Massachusetts, a 30% increase since 2006, our state food banks could still not cover everyone in need.²

Children and Seniors most vulnerable

Children are especially vulnerable to hunger and poverty. According to the USDA, 17 million – or nearly one in four – children in the US are food insecure³ and about one in five under the age of 18 live in poverty.⁴ Hunger has long-lasting, devastating effects on the health and development of children. Failing to provide children with adequate nutrition in the first three to five years of life can impair mental and physical development and leave children susceptible to disease and other problems later in life.⁵

Food insecurity among low-income school children in Massachusetts has now become a public health emergency requiring immediate attention to help this growing population of at-risk youth.

Children are not the only ones vulnerable to hunger. Inadequate access to food and increasing malnutrition among our seniors is also a growing concern, complicated by age-related issues such as decreased mobility, limited outside assistance, and fixed incomes. Too often, seniors have to choose between spending their income on food or medicine.

1. Feeding America's Hunger in America Study, 2010
2. Hunger in Massachusetts Study 2010
3. US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States, 2008, November 2009.
4. US Census Bureau: www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty08/pov08hi
5. Feeding American, John Cook K. Jeng, Child Food Insecurity: The Economic Impact on our Nation, May 2009. Project Bread Hunger Report



**Enhancing nutrition programs in
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Nutrition Education

Complicating food security issues are concerns about poor nutrition and health and rising levels of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity-related ailments. American society has a new label – obesogenic – a term used to classify environments that promote excessive consumption of food, unhealthy foods, and physical inactivity. However, while the American diet leaves much to be desired in many cases, growing media attention has brought about new awareness of the problem and positive changes resulting in many of us eating more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and less processed food.

Reversing the trend

Because education is the first line of defense against hunger and malnutrition, The Massachusetts Public Health commissioner is increasing support for better nutrition with more school nutrition and education programs, local farm support, and Eat Right programs that target both children and adults. At the same time, federal support for improved nutrition is increasing, as indicated by President Obama's initiatives to reverse the hunger trend with restored job growth, expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) benefits, and other hunger programs.

What Can Be Done

Food insecurity and hunger are serious and growing public health problems that have a direct impact on education, healthcare, and our quality of life. Enhancing nutrition programs in Massachusetts requires strong partnerships and more efficient collaboration among nonprofits.

While the Commonwealth has made great strides to maximize participation in federal nutrition programs and food banks and pantries have stepped up to give away more food than ever, more can be done to bring the programs to scale and improve access to and delivery of programs to those in need.

Growing Places Garden Project addresses the important issues of food security and nutrition education by teaching people in need how to grow their own food in 22 towns in Massachusetts. Since 2001, Growing Places Garden Project has helped almost one thousand people grow vegetables, gain self-confidence, and learn how to take more control over their nutrition.

For more information about Growing Places Garden Project, please visit us at www.growingplaces.org or call us at 978-598-3723.