

# IOWA FOOD *Security, Insecurity, AND Hunger*

## Emergency Food Resources: Meeting Food Needs of Iowa Households



Approximately 35 million people in the United States are food insecure—they do not have adequate resources to meet their basic food needs. In Iowa, 266,295 people in 104,584 households are food insecure (U.S. Department of Agriculture Data 2002).

In 2004, the Iowa Department of Human Services (IDHS) reported a near all-time high of 185,000 Iowans receiving Food Assistance (formerly called Food Stamps), a 16 percent increase from 2003.

Explanations for this increase include

- a transition to an electronic benefits card system that reduces the stigma associated with using the food program,
- a simplified program application process,
- a change in applicant income reporting (every six months instead of monthly), and
- improved outreach efforts (IDHS 2004).



### The food pantry safety net

Food pantries are local volunteer organizations often operated by public-private partnerships. Food pantries help to meet the need for food when individuals are not eligible for or aware of Food Assistance, or Food Assistance is inadequate to meet their food needs. In 2001, more than 23 million people in the United States depended on food pantries, emergency food kitchens, and shelters to meet their daily food needs. More than half of the 24,000 emergency food agencies surveyed in 2001 reported an increase in the number of individuals served since 1998 (America's Second Harvest, 2002).

Iowa has experienced a similar increase. IDHS reported 1.4 million requests for emergency food services in 2003, almost twice the number of requests reported in 2000 (721,869) and a 54 percent increase over the number of requests reported in 2002 (934,382) (IDHS, 2004).



### Iowa food pantry study

During June 2002, Iowa State University Extension conducted a survey of people who used food pantries in two urban (Polk and Scott) and two rural (Decatur and Monroe) counties in Iowa. Pantry staff distributed surveys to all adults who visited the pantries. The results<sup>1</sup> presented here are based on 597 responses obtained from 477 urban, 60 rural, and 60 suburban pantry clients (Garasky et al. 2004 in review).

Although the majority of food pantry households were food insecure, suburban and urban households experienced a higher rate of food insecurity (95 and 84 percent, respectively) than did rural households (59 percent). More than half of the

#### In Iowa

- **Approximately 270,000 Iowans are food insecure (2002 data).**
- **1.4 million requests were made to food pantries and soup kitchens in 2003.**

suburban and urban households experienced hunger, compared with 36 percent of the rural households. Also, 84 percent of the households with children under age 18 were food insecure, and 55 percent were experiencing hunger.

Urban and suburban food pantry participants reported going to a food pantry about four times within the past year, compared with rural participants who reported going once during the past year. About 33 percent of respondents participated in Food Assistance and 13 percent participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

Iowans with limited incomes combine earnings and public and private assistance in an effort to meet basic needs. The 1999

**Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Nutrition Network, and the Iowa Department of Public Health present this policy brief**

- **to increase understanding about the status of food insecurity and hunger among Iowa families, and**
- **to suggest specific action steps to help Iowa families and communities become more food secure.**

## Food Security

Access to enough food for an active and healthy life.

At a minimum, food security includes

- readily available, nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and
- the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing or other coping strategies).

## Food Insecurity

Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

## Hunger

The uneasy or painful sensation caused by a recurrent or involuntary lack of food. Hunger is a potential, although not necessary, consequence of food insecurity. Over time, hunger can lead to malnutrition. (Life Sciences Research Organization, 1990)

Iowa Food Stamp Leavers Survey revealed that 29 percent of those surveyed (n=735) who left Food Assistance in 1997 had sought help from a food pantry for food two years later (Jensen et al. 2002). Fifty-five percent of the respondents were food insecure at some time in the previous 12 months, and 28 percent experienced food insecurity with hunger during the previous year. Thus, individuals who no longer received Food Assistance had unmet basic needs.

## Who uses food pantries?

Most families who turn to food pantries are working or have children (Zedlewski and Nelson 2003). In the Iowa study, 43 percent of the food pantry households had one or more adults who worked. The mean household monthly income was \$761. In the national study, *Hunger in America* 2001, 39 percent of the households had one or more adults who worked, and 64 percent of the households were at or below the federal poverty level.

## Implications

More than 80 percent of the Iowa study participants were food insecure; 53 percent were food insecure with hunger. These families face many common challenges, such as access to reliable and affordable transportation. Study participants, especially those in rural and suburban areas, report that access to affordable transportation to grocery stores is problematic. However, the transportation dilemma goes beyond rural areas. An urban mother participating in an earlier study reported that her bus stop is two blocks away. When shopping she must take her child with her and carry her groceries home. She said that in cold, icy, windy weather it is not worth it to walk to the bus stop to get to the supermarket in order to save money. The convenience store that is one block away is her grocery store. "That isn't too healthy, but my son is eating," she commented. (Greder 2000, p. 150).

Food pantry users are not a homogenous group. They do not have the same personal characteristics, nor do they access their food environments in the same way. The rural Iowa respondents relied on a pantry a little more than once a year, while the urban and suburban households averaged visiting a pantry once every three months. Differences across groups may be related to rural areas lacking an extensive network of food pantries and/or differences in who uses food pantries. Unfortunately, the rural and suburban sample sizes at times limit the ability to discuss group differences with statistical confidence. If effective policy is to be developed, more research is needed regarding the circumstances under which urban, rural, and suburban families with limited incomes access their food environment and meet their nutritional needs.

Households lacking transportation will have problems that go beyond accessing the normal food system. Troubling among the participants of this study are the low rates of participation in Food Assistance.

- Only one in three Iowa urban food pantry users currently receives Food Assistance; the rate is about one in four for rural and suburban pantry clients.
- Although WIC benefits are more targeted—eligibility criteria are more restrictive—WIC participation rates range from 14 percent among the rural group to 3 percent among suburban respondents.
- Other evidence suggests that non-participation among families eligible for Food Assistance is a problem that goes beyond Iowa and food pantry users (Bartlett and Burstein 2004). In 2000, an alarming 1.3 million children lived in U.S. households that were eligible for a monthly Food Assistance benefit of more than \$200, but did not participate (Food and Nutrition Service 2003a).

Food Assistance policy must expand to address the transportation-related program access problems of eligible families. Further,

all USDA food assistance programs should have a policy objective of increasing participation among eligible families.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In total, 629 individuals completed the survey (589 through the food pantries and 40 from focus groups), but the county in which the pantry was located was not discernable for 32 responses. Regarding pantry location, 470 responses were from food pantries in urban communities, 60 from a suburban site, and 27 from rural pantries. Thirty-three focus group respondents resided in rural counties and seven in urban counties.

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