

Assessing hunger in Waukesha County

Surveys show hunger isn't uncommon; many families use food pantries but don't take advantage of other food-assistance programs

The results of a survey of Waukesha school families might surprise you. They show that a sizeable number have gone hungry in the past year and that many school families use food pantries.

First, a little background: Last year, Waukesha County UW-Extension and the Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition teamed up with students, parents, teachers and administrators at 17 elementary schools in the city of Waukesha to find out the extent of hunger and food insecurity in Waukesha County. Schools distributed surveys to 6,667 families. Of those, 2,376 families, or 36 percent, successfully completed surveys.

The survey gives us a picture of the food challenges families face and the situations that increase their risk for hunger and food insecurity.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity means not always having enough food for an active, healthy life. It means worrying about food, skipping meals, not eating enough, or going without food due to lack of money.

A surprising discovery is that almost 1 in 5 families is food insecure. Of those, 7% experienced hunger in the past year. Hunger and other food problems pose a serious social issue: Research shows that children who don't get enough to eat often have behavior and academic problems.

Low-income single moms, renters at greatest risk

Low-income families are at the greatest risk of going hungry, skipping meals, or not getting enough food. For example, more than a fifth (26%) of the families who completed surveys are poor or near poor (their income is below 185% of the poverty level, about \$38,000 a year for a family of four). More than half (53%) of the poor households are food insecure, compared to 6% of remaining households.

Others at risk include single-parent families and renters. For example:

- 44% of families headed by a single mother are food insecure, compared to 13% of households headed by a couple.
- 45% of families who rent homes are food insecure, compared to 9% of homeowners.

Contrary to what you might expect, most food-insecure families are not out of work. In fact, almost all families (90%) with food problems say there's at least one person in the household who works outside the home. Of those, about 80 percent say there is at least one person employed full time.

Families don't use food programs

Despite Waukesha County's reputation as a higher income county, a tenth of the families surveyed obtain food at food pantries, churches or meal sites. What's more, many families eligible for food assistance don't receive it. For example:

- 10% of families say they receive food stamps, an additional 9% of eligible families don't;
- About 40% say their child gets free or reduced-price breakfast, 19% more are eligible;
- 22% say their children received free or low-cost lunches, 6% more are eligible; and
- 10% have used food pantries or meal sites.

(more on back)



USDA photo by Ken Hammond

Surveys of 2,376 Waukesha County school families show that about one in five skip meals, don't eat enough or go without food due to lack of money.

HUNGER RESOURCES

Contact Waukesha County
UW-Extension Nutrition Coalition
Coordinator Melinda Stuart
for more information at:
mstuart@waukeshacounty.gov

Find out about the
Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition
at <http://www.WCNCWaukesha.org>

Learn more about hunger and the
issues that affect your county at
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs>

UW-Extension Nutrition Education
Program resources:
[http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/
waukesha/wnep/index.html](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cty/waukesha/wnep/index.html)



Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition

Through collaboration, cooperation and information sharing,
the Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition works to prevent
hunger and food insecurity, provide information and education
on nutrition issues, and promote social policies that achieve
food security while honoring the dignity of those we serve.

Why kids don't eat breakfast at school

Eating breakfast helps kids pay attention and learn. Yet 16% of parents say their children skip breakfast at least once during the school week. Six of the 17 schools surveyed serve breakfast. However, many children don't eat breakfast at school. Reasons include:

- 48% say their child doesn't get to school in time;
- 32% say breakfast at home is healthier;
- 24% aren't familiar with the program;
- 23% say their child doesn't like the school breakfast; and
- 18% say the school breakfast period is too short.

Nutrition Coalition response

The survey has given us lots to think about and has brought us together to look for ways to end hunger and food insecurity in Waukesha County. To address issues uncovered by the survey, Waukesha County UW-Extension and the Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition will:

- work with school districts and other partners to identify barriers to food-stamp participation;
- explore options for offering breakfast, lunch and healthy snacks at more schools;
- help build community awareness of hunger in our midst; and
 - make community resources more accessible.

What you can do

Hunger seems like an overwhelming problem. But it's not. We can work to ensure that everyone in our community has enough to eat. You can help by:

- joining the Waukesha County Nutrition Coalition;
- learning about hunger issues and resources;
- educating others in your community; and
- volunteering or donating to a local food-assistance program.