

Food Insecurity on the Rise in the Coulee Region

The ability to obtain enough food for an active, healthy life is the most basic of human needs. Yet, millions of American families cannot achieve this fundamental element of well-being. In 2002, 12 million U.S. households were identified as “food insecure” and 4 million of those experienced hunger. Feelings of hunger may be temporary for most food insecure families. However, the mental and physical changes that accompany inadequate food intake may have long term impacts on learning, development, productivity, physical/psychological health, and family life.

What is “food insecurity”?

Food insecurity exists when people have uncertain or limited access to food. They may worry about having enough food. Or they may need to juggle what little money they have to meet basic needs such as rent, heat, medicine, and food. When most severe, food insecurity includes hunger. Households experience hunger if adults or children reduce the amount of food they eat because they cannot afford what they need.

Why are people going hungry?

- Poverty is closely linked to hunger. The federal government uses income guidelines to determine the poverty level. In 2004, a family of three, with a yearly income of \$15,670 or less, is considered to be living in poverty. Many people with incomes above the federal poverty line are still considered “low-income”. While poverty is strongly related to food insecurity, not all poor households are food insecure. Many people use assistance programs such as Food Stamps and housing assistance to have enough money for food. And not all food insecure households are poor.
- Limited access to food may also contribute to food insecurity. Rural residents may face transportation challenges as they try to get to distant grocery stores. This may also be true for city residents.
- Limited access to and participation in food assistance programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture identified confusion, lack of awareness of program rules, and difficulties in applying for assistance as key barriers to participating in the Food Stamp Program. Notably, Wisconsin ranks last in the nation in access to school breakfast programs.

In the Coulee Region . . .

Unfortunately, many families in our area experience food insecurity and hunger. David (not his real name), a widower, lives in La Crosse County and has two children, Logan (age 4) and Katelyn (age 2). David works 40 hours/week, earning \$9.00 an hour. Their annual household income is \$18,720. How does this family live on \$18,720? How do they budget? Major expenses they have each year include:

- Rent - \$8,040 (cost of an average three-bedroom apartment in La Crosse County)
- Utilities - \$1,800 (heat, water, electricity, etc.)
- Transportation – \$3,300 (gas, insurance, repairs, etc.)
- Health insurance - \$2,544 (this is in addition to the portion that David’s employer pays)
- Childcare - \$2,500 (this is in addition to childcare subsidies)
- Food - \$900 (this is in addition to food stamps)

These expenses total \$19,084, which is \$364 more than David has earned. And, all of his family’s needs have not been met. What about the other items that were left out? Clothes, shoes, diapers, cleaning supplies, toiletries, holiday gifts, and entertainment. How does he pay for these? How does he decide what to leave out? In order to pay his bills each month, often it is the money for food that is sacrificed. David does his best to make his family’s food stretch, but often he is unable to provide three healthy meals for his family everyday. There are many days when David skips breakfast and/or lunch in order to have more food for his children.

The following table provides local economic data and participation in food assistance programs from the U.S. Census:

Population in Poverty					
	Crawford County	La Crosse County	Monroe County	Vernon County	Wisconsin
Total population	17,243	107,120	40,899	28,056	5,363,675
Poverty rate	10.2%	10.7%	12.0%	14.2%	8.7%
% of Population with income below 185% of poverty	29.0%	24.7%	28.0%	32.5%	20.9%
Food Stamp Program Participation					
% of population receiving Food Stamps, 2002	5.9%	6.7%	7.5%	5.0%	7.8%
Access to School Breakfast					
% of eligible low-income students who are enrolled in schools with breakfast programs, 2002	73.1%	83.1%	70.0%	99.9%	56.8%
Percent of WIC Clients who were Food Insecure and Experienced Hunger, 2002					
Food insecure	37.0%	48.0%	36.0%	37.0%	44.0%
Experienced hunger	10.0%	19.0%	16.0%	13.0%	19.0%

Additional data collected by the Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, Inc., demonstrates food insecurity issues in La Crosse County:

- 36% of children attending La Crosse Public Schools receive free or reduced meals
- 53% of local food pantry users live in a household in which at least one person is employed
- 81% of local food pantry users earn less than \$1,000 per month
- Of those enrolled in W-2 (Wisconsin Works) and working, 91% use food pantries to get food when they do not have enough to eat
- From 1996 to 1999, the total food packages distributed at local food pantry sites in La Crosse rose 57%
- The number of meals served at The Place of Grace meal site increased 93% from Jan. 1997 to Jan. 1999
- In 2002, the Kane Street Community Garden distributed 36,000 pounds of vegetables to over 500 individuals; in 2003, they distributed 46,000 pounds of produce
- In June 2002, WAFER distributed 759 food packages, in June 2003 they distributed 854 food packages
- Approximately 17% of the people served by WAFER are of Asian descent

In Wisconsin . . .

- 1 out of every 12 Wisconsin households is food insecure; 1 in 30 households experience hunger.
- 31% of poor households in Wisconsin are food insecure; 65% of Wisconsin's food insecure households have income above the poverty line.
- Only about 50% of eligible Wisconsin residents participate in the Food Stamp Program.
- 43% of Wisconsin schools that offer lunch programs also offer breakfast programs; 24% of low-income students who receive subsidized school lunch also receive school breakfast.

Food insecurity and hunger rates increased between 1999 and 2001 in the United States with Wisconsin experiencing a higher rate of increase than most other states. People are also seeking more food assistance. Food Stamp participation is on the rise in Wisconsin and nationally. In Wisconsin, participation increased 70% between May 1999 and May 2003. This recent increase has been among the highest in the nation. Use of food pantries and other emergency food outlets continues to rise.

Food Assistance Programs in the Coulee Region

In each of our four counties, community-based food pantries exist for eligible households. Couleecap, Inc. supplements these food pantries through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Although eligibility guidelines exist for TEFAP and some food pantries, most food insecure families will qualify to receive assistance. For instance, to meet the 185% of poverty guideline required for TEFAP food, a family of 3 can have an annual income at or below \$28,989.

Dedicated staff and volunteer networks in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe and Vernon counties continue to promote the idea that hunger is a condition we should not tolerate in our communities. These community and faith-based food pantries work tirelessly to meet the needs of hungry households. From August 2002-July 2003, TEFAP provided 882,395 pounds of food to 25,544 households (59,128 people total) throughout our four counties; from August 2003-July 2004, 1,266,482 pounds of food was distributed to 32,159 households (87,705 people total) throughout our four counties. As large as this number may seem, it represents a distribution of only two grocery bags of food (or 14.5 pounds) for each person who visits the pantry each month. Most pantries limit visits to once a month in an effort to serve as many people as possible. However, a poor economic outlook and local layoffs keep increasing the number of eligible households in each county using the food pantries as a supplemental food source.

In addition to food pantry sites, each of our counties have WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Programs that assist with nutritional needs of pregnant or breastfeeding women, infants, and children (up to age 5). All of the school districts provide a free or reduced lunch program for eligible low-income students and some of them have breakfast and summer lunch programs as well.

Each of us has the power to help eliminate food insecurity and hunger. Here are some ways you can get involved in your community:

- Donate your time, money, or other resources to local organizations that help provide food and information to people living in poverty.
- Participate in or create a local hunger task force.
- Support local elected officials who care about food insecurity, hunger, and poverty issues.
- Educate yourself about food insecurity and hunger. Visit your local library or research websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Food Security Project – <http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs>; Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, Inc. – www.lacrossehtf.org; The Food Research and Action Center – www.frac.org; World Hunger Year - www.worldhungeryear.org; Center on Hunger and Poverty – www.centeronhunger.org; and Community Food Security Coalition – www.foodsecurity.org.
- Help build awareness of hunger in your community.
- Talk to your local school about starting a breakfast program.
- Help start a summer meal program for children when school is out.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for child care, and more assistance with healthcare costs, so working families have adequate money to cover food needs.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more than 38 years, we have been helping low-income people build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. We operate over 50 programs in the areas of housing, family and youth services, and emergency services.

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