



2011 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island



The Rhode Island Community Food Bank produces this Status Report each year to document the extent of hunger and food insecurity in the state. This 2011 Status Report presents stark statistics depicting the growing demand for food assistance. It also examines the “meal gap” in Rhode Island that leaves many families without adequate food. Along with demonstrating the urgency of the problem, the Status Report details the steps necessary to close the meal gap and help everyone in need.

Major Findings

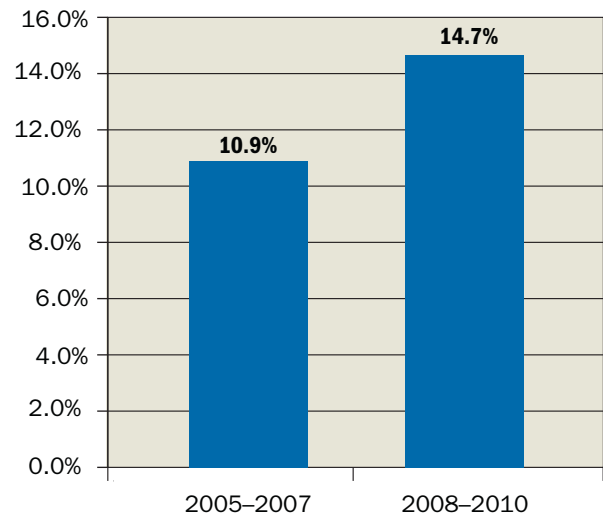
- 59,000 Rhode Island households are unable to meet their basic food needs
- Low-income Rhode Islanders miss out on 34 million meals each year
- Demand at emergency food programs has grown by 58 percent since the start of the economic recession
- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, once known as the Food Stamp Program) is now the primary source of meals for low-income families and individuals

Food Insecurity and Hunger Rise Sharply

According to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study, a growing number of households in Rhode Island lack adequate food. The prevalence of food insecurity in Rhode Island is 14.7%.¹ Someone who is “food insecure” cuts the size of meals or skips meals altogether. In the course of a year, two out of every five food-insecure households run out of food entirely and experience hunger.

The rate of food insecurity in Rhode Island increased significantly following the economic recession, rising from 10.9% in

Households Reporting Food Insecurity



Food Insecurity in Rhode Island Reaches the Highest Level on Record

2007 to 14.7% in 2010. The recovery from the recession continues at a very slow pace, causing enormous hardship for low-income families:

- 107,000 adults (19 percent of the state’s labor force) are unemployed or underemployed²
- 42,000 children (19 percent of Rhode Islanders under age 18) live in poverty³
- One in every ten home mortgages is in foreclosure or serious delinquency, the highest rate in New England⁴

Demand for Food Assistance Up 58% in Four Years

More Rhode Islanders need help getting enough to eat. The number of people served at emergency food pantries increased by 58 percent over the past four years. Currently these programs feed 60,000 people each month.

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank annually distributes more than nine million pounds of food through its statewide network which includes 117 food pantries, 27 meal programs and 7 shelters. In 2011, many of these programs experienced severe cut backs in funding when Congress reduced Food and Shelter grants by 40 percent, a loss of \$385,000 in federal funds to Rhode Island.

More Children and Minorities Served

Families with children and the minority community are particularly hard hit by Rhode Island's high levels of unemployment and poverty. The overall poverty rate in Rhode Island is 14 percent. However, the rate among children is 19 percent, and among minority groups, it is even higher: 30 percent among Latinos and 37 percent among African Americans.⁵

A study of clients at emergency food programs in Rhode Island found that families with children and these minority groups are over-represented among all those receiving food assistance.⁶ At food pantries, 41 percent of clients had children at home, whereas just 27 percent of all households in Rhode Island are families with children. Similarly, the study found that 16 percent of emergency food program clients are Black, 35 percent are Hispanic or Latino, and 43 percent are non-Hispanic White. By comparison, the overall population of Rhode Island is 6 percent Black, 13 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 76 percent non-Hispanic White.

The same study examined the capacity of emergency food programs to meet client needs. Agencies in Rhode Island were asked whether their food programs were stable or facing problems that threaten their continued operation. Only 30 percent of food program directors reported that they were stable, while

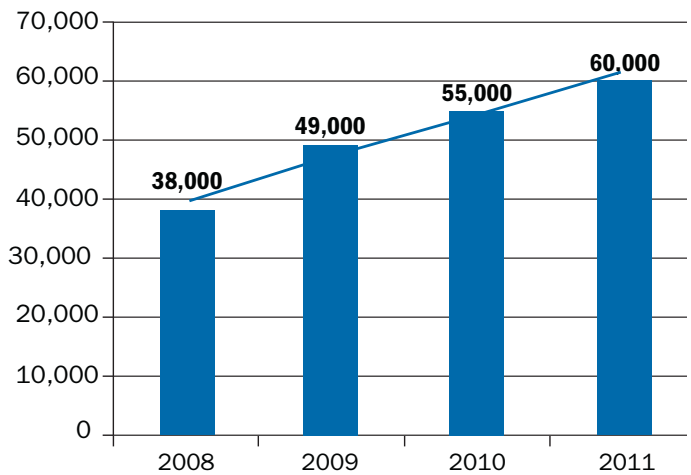
70 percent stated that they were strained by limited funding and other resources.

Hotline Use Up 17% in One Year

United Way 2-1-1 Rhode Island and the Aging and Disability Resource Center, known as THE POINT, are 24-hour hotlines that provide comprehensive and specialized information and referral for people in need. In the 12-month period, September 2010 to August 2011, these hotlines received 197,693 calls, 17 percent more than the previous year, including 43,510 calls for food assistance.⁷

From August 26 to September 6, 2011, during ten crucial days that tropical storm Irene affected Rhode Island, the hotlines received 25,907 calls. Over 5,000 people were assisted with food pantry referrals and emergency SNAP replacement benefits.

People Served Monthly at Emergency Food Pantries in Rhode Island



Average for 12 months ending in August of each year



The Food Bank Network of Member Agencies



The number indicated for each city or town is the total number of sites in that location.

The Food Bank distributes food to 243 sites in Rhode Island through its network of Member Agencies, including:

- emergency food pantries
- meal programs
- shelters
- transitional housing
- group homes
- senior centers
- day care and afterschool programs

The Meal Gap: 34 Million Meals

Thousands of low-income families and individuals in Rhode Island cannot afford three healthy meals a day. Even after utilizing government nutrition programs and emergency food assistance, low-income Rhode Islanders still miss out on meals. The number of missing meals provides a measure of the extent of the need. It also suggests potential solutions to the problem of hunger.

There are 181,000 Rhode Islanders living in households with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level—the level that qualifies children for free school meals.⁸ Poverty guidelines are based on household size and income.⁹ If a parent with two children has a full-time job at \$11 per hour, earning \$23,000 per year, then the family's income is below 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

2011 Federal Poverty Guidelines

Persons in Household	Annual Income at 100% of Poverty Level	Annual Income at 130% of Poverty Level
1	\$10,890	\$14,157
2	\$14,710	\$19,123
3	\$18,530	\$24,089



How to Calculate the Missing Meals

For every Rhode Islander in this population to receive three meals per day, 198 million meals are needed per year.

181,000 people x 3 meals per day x 365 days = 198 million meals per year

Low-income households spend \$14.34 per person, per week of their own money on food.¹⁰

181,000 people x \$14.34 per week x 52 weeks = \$135 million per year in food spending

Annually, low-income Rhode Islanders spend \$135 million of their own money on food. Since the average cost of a meal is \$2.84, low-income Rhode Islanders use their own money to purchase 47.5 million meals per year.¹¹

\$135 million/\$2.84 per meal = 47.5 million meals per year

In addition to their own money, Rhode Islanders also use SNAP and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) benefits to purchase food. Last year, SNAP spending was \$237.6 million and WIC spending was \$13.7 million, equaling 83.7 million meals from SNAP benefits and 4.8 million meals from WIC benefits.¹²

\$237.6 million in SNAP benefits/\$2.84 per meal = 83.7 million meals per year

\$13.7 million in WIC benefits/\$2.84 per meal = 4.8 million meals per year

During school year 2010–2011, the National School Lunch Program provided 13.3 million meals in Rhode Island, while 4.3 million School Breakfast meals were served.¹³ Approximately 58 percent of lunches and 76 percent of breakfasts, or 11 million meals, were provided free-of-charge.

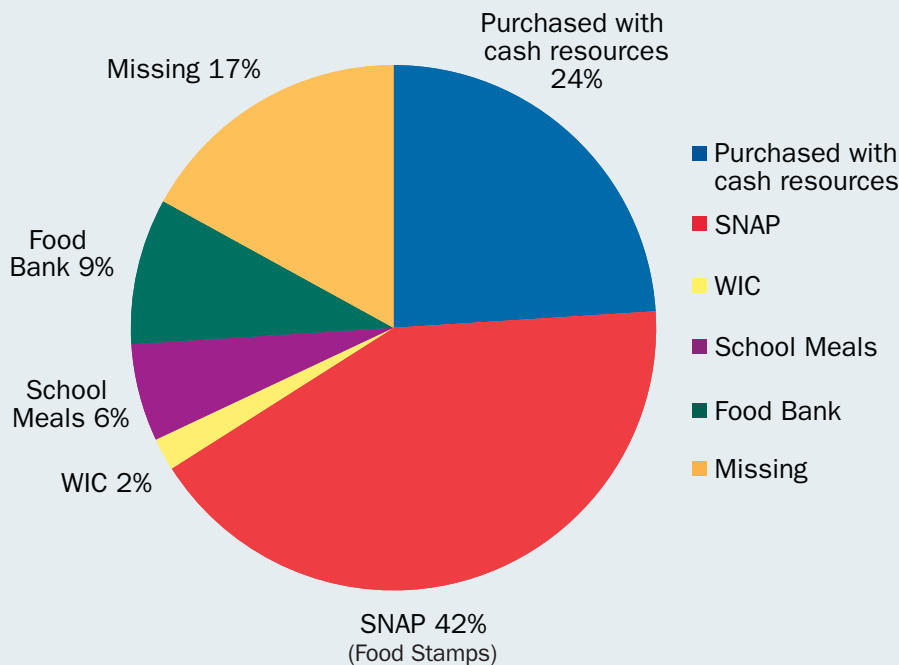
11 million free school meals were served to Rhode Island children last year

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank's statewide network of emergency food programs distributed 17 million meals between September 2010 and August 2011.

17 million meals were provided by Member Agencies of the Food Bank to people in need

Through all of these sources—meals purchased with cash, government programs and emergency food assistance—low-income families and individuals received 164 million meals, short of the 198 million meals needed. This leaves a meal gap of 34 million meals.

Meals Provided and Missing



This analysis shows that low-income Rhode Islanders depend on SNAP benefits to feed their families, more than other federal programs and more than emergency food assistance.

Even with over 83 million meals provided by SNAP benefits, there is still a significant meal gap in Rhode Island. This meal gap could be overcome if SNAP enrollment reached 10 percent more of those who are eligible and the average SNAP benefit amount was raised by 10 percent to help recipients afford adequate food.

Real People Behind the Numbers

When the jewelry business was thriving in Rhode Island, Donna never wanted for work. The income helped her to raise five children, three of whom have gone on to college. Hard economic times hit the industry she relied on, however, and she suffered stints of unemployment. Eventually, she found work as a waitress. Unfortunately, the restaurant where she was working closed recently.

"I thought I might be seeing you again," said Lorraine Burns, director of St. Teresa of Avila Food Pantry in Providence, when Donna walked through the door. "I heard about the restaurant. How are you holding up?"

Donna reported that she was back on the daily job search and taking a class at a local library to improve her resumé writing skills. She is now receiving SNAP benefits, but even so, the cupboard is looking a little sparse. She knew that Lorraine would welcome her to the food pantry, as she had the last time Donna was unemployed. Walking down the street from the pantry, Donna is greeted by fellow residents of every age and ethnicity. They recognize Donna as the lady who serves the food at a community meal site operated by a local church, where she volunteers at least once a week, whether she's working or not.

"We all need to help each other," says Donna. "I've been on the receiving end, and I've been on the giving end. I know what it's like."

Total Meals Needed = 198 Million

Source of Meals	No. of Meals Provided
Purchased with Cash Resources	47.5 million
SNAP benefits	+ 83.7 million
WIC benefits	+ 4.8 million
School Lunch and Breakfast	+ 11.0 million
Food Bank	+ 17.0 million
TOTAL MEALS PROVIDED	= 164.0 million
TOTAL MISSING MEALS	34.0 million

Last year, SNAP provided 83.7 million meals to low-income Rhode Island families.



Federal Nutrition Programs Play a Critical Role in Preventing Hunger

The mission of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank is to provide food to people in need and promote long-term solutions to the problem of hunger. The federal nutrition programs are designed to prevent hunger by offering ongoing support to low-income families and individuals. These federally funded programs include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and the Summer Food Service Program.

SNAP Enrollment Doubled in Four Years

SNAP expands a family's food budget, allowing them to increase the quality and quantity of food that they purchase. The benefits are delivered by Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, which are used like debit cards at authorized food retailers. Although the state administers SNAP, the federal government pays 100 percent of SNAP benefits.

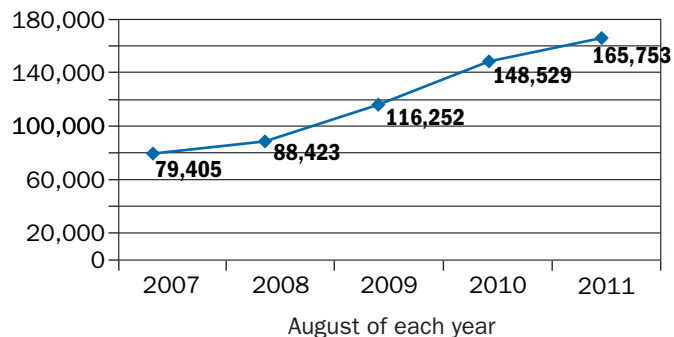
SNAP enrollment in Rhode Island has doubled since the beginning of the economic recession. In 2007, approximately 36,000 households were enrolled in SNAP, representing 79,000

Rhode Islanders. Today, over 90,000 households participate (22 percent of all households), representing more than 165,000 people.¹⁴ The *SNAP Outreach Project* at the University of Rhode Island identifies eligible families and helps them to apply for benefits. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank partners with the *SNAP Outreach Project*, employing workers to assist clients at emergency food programs.

Households with children make up half of SNAP recipients.¹⁵ Researchers have found that SNAP benefits help to protect children from food insecurity and related health problems, such as iron-deficiency anemia.¹⁶ In fact, young children living in low-income families that do not receive SNAP benefits are 50 percent more likely to experience food insecurity than participating children.¹⁷

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) increased SNAP benefit levels in order to boost food purchases, stimulate the economy and aid local retailers. The increase in benefits depended on the number of people in the household; benefits for a family of four went up by \$80 per month. According to the USDA, these higher benefit amounts allowed families to purchase more food and significantly reduced food insecurity.¹⁸

Rhode Islanders Enrolled in SNAP



Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Average Monthly SNAP Benefit per Household in Rhode Island ¹⁹	\$196.96	\$203.20	\$216.06	\$275.54	\$271.85

The federal stimulus package in 2009 boosted SNAP benefits

WIC Funding Threatened

WIC safeguards the health of low-income women, infants and young children. The program provides nutrition education, counseling, breastfeeding support and supplemental food benefits in the form of vouchers for the purchase of specific foods such as cereal, bread, milk, peanut butter, fresh fruits and vegetables. The average monthly benefit in Rhode Island is \$45 per participant.²⁰ Children are only eligible for WIC benefits up to age five. Currently in Rhode Island, nearly 24,000 people participate in the program.²¹

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which President Barack Obama signed into law in December 2010, invests in improving the program. The bill mandates implementation of electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, like those used in SNAP, to replace WIC vouchers by 2020. EBT cards are more efficient to administer and more convenient for families to use.

Unfortunately, in June 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to take significant funding away from WIC. The House in its Agriculture Appropriations spending bill for 2012 cut WIC by 10 percent, which would keep the program from serving all those who are eligible.

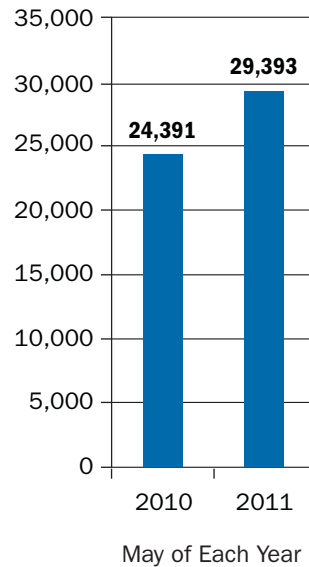
School Meals Help to Narrow the Meal Gap

All public schools in Rhode Island are required to provide both breakfast and lunch to students. In 2009, the Rhode Island Department of Education implemented new nutrition standards for these meals. The nutrition requirements increase whole grains, fruits and vegetables, promote low-fat milk options and reduce sodium levels.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs reimburse school districts for meals offered free-of-charge or at a reduced price to eligible students. These meals are an important resource for low-income families, providing nearly half of the weekly diet for their children. During the 2010–2011 school year, 49,200 children in Rhode Island on average received free or reduced-price lunch each school day.²²

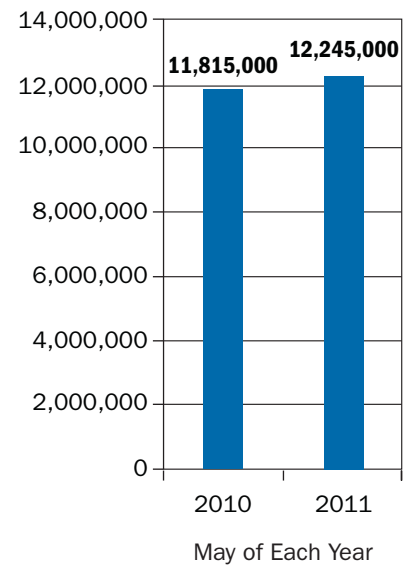
Rhode Island children participating in School Breakfast

(21% increase)



School Breakfast participation in the United States

(4% increase)



School breakfast participation increased by 21 percent in Rhode Island, far exceeding the national growth rate of 4 percent.

As compared to School Lunch, many fewer students participate in the School Breakfast Program. Some superintendents, recognizing the importance of breakfast in reducing hunger and improving learning, have attempted to boost participation by offering Universal School Breakfast, which provides meals free-of-charge to all students. Some schools have gone one step further and serve breakfast in the classroom, which facilitates the transition from eating to learning and makes breakfast accessible to many more students. All of these efforts resulted in a significant increase, 21 percent, in breakfast participation in Rhode Island schools last year.²³

Summer Meals Serve 5,000 Children

During the summer, thousands of Rhode Island families struggle to provide food for their children while school is out and students lack access to school meal programs. The Summer Food Service Program attempts to meet this need by providing meals for children at summer recreation programs. In 2011, there were 167 summer feeding sites in Rhode Island, and lunches were served to 5,000 children in July.²⁴ At this level, summer meals reach only 10 percent of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches during the school year.

During the 2010–2011 school year, 49,200 children in Rhode Island received free or reduced-price lunch each school day.

Closing the Meal Gap in Rhode Island

Rhode Island's meal gap of 34 million meals did not happen overnight. Before the Great Recession hit the rest of the country, Rhode Island was already in a tail-spin. By September 2008, Rhode Island had the highest rate of unemployment in the country and the highest foreclosure rate in New England. The heaviest job losses were in construction and manufacturing, affecting low-wage workers and middle-class families. Foreclosures were centered in the state's urban areas victimized by "subprime" mortgages.

In February 2009, Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in order to revive the economy and ensure an adequate safety net for 14 million Americans who were out of work. Unemployment benefits were extended and food stamp benefits (now called SNAP benefits) were raised. As income declined for many households, more families became eligible for SNAP benefits and enrolled in the program. Now, SNAP reaches one in five households in Rhode Island and SNAP benefits are the primary source of meals for low-income families in the state.

However, in the past year, Washington lost sight of the importance of maintaining the nutrition safety net in America. In April 2011, Congress reduced federal grants to emergency food programs and shelters by 40 percent. And in June 2011, the U.S. House of Representatives took millions of dollars away from WIC, proposing to cut the program by 10 percent. These decisions raise a difficult question for our political leaders: When both emergency food assistance and government programs are cut, where can struggling people turn for help?

According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the recession officially ended in June 2009, but there are few signs of economic recovery in Rhode Island. Unemployment remains high, food insecurity is at a record-level and 60,000 people turn to emergency food programs for help each month. With food

pantries, soup kitchens and shelters facing funding cuts, these programs cannot possibly increase their food distribution to provide all the meals needed by low-income Rhode Islanders.

In the long-term, the best way to close the meal gap in Rhode Island is through restored jobs and wages. Yet, until economic recovery takes hold, struggling families need government help. Every eligible household should enroll in SNAP. And as part of the 2012 Farm Bill, Congress should increase SNAP benefit levels. If SNAP enrollment reached 10 percent more of those who are eligible, and the average SNAP benefit amount was raised by just 10 percent, the meal gap would be eliminated. We must use all the resources available to us to end hunger in Rhode Island.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the nutrition safety net by increasing SNAP benefit levels in the 2012 Farm Bill.
- Reach out to all eligible Rhode Island families and encourage them to enroll in SNAP
- Fully fund WIC to ensure that every eligible infant and child receives these critical nutrition benefits.
- Make WIC more user-friendly by replacing WIC vouchers with EBT cards.
- Restore federal grants for emergency food programs and homeless shelters.
- Provide school breakfast to every child who wants it, free of charge, at the beginning of the school day at all schools with a majority of students from low-income families.

Endnotes

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