



HUNGER IN AMERICA

Rhode Island Report: Executive Summary¹

Introduction

In 2009, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank participated in a research study of clients at emergency food programs as part of a national study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and sponsored by Feeding America. At program sites throughout Rhode Island, Food Bank staff members and volunteers conducted interviews with 361 clients in March and April 2009. In addition, the directors of 250 emergency food programs responded to a survey about their operations and services.

The study was conducted at a time of rapidly growing need throughout the state. One year before the study, in April 2008, emergency food programs assisted 36,500 people and provided 844,000 meals. At the time of the study, these same programs were serving over 53,000 people and providing 1.3 million meals each month, an increase of 45 percent in those served and 54 percent more meals.



Results of the Rhode Island Study

The results demonstrate that people who seek help at emergency food programs are poor and hungry. The vast majority of those served by emergency food programs in Rhode Island, 76 percent, have income at or below the federal poverty level. Based upon income and family size, federal guidelines set the poverty level at an annual income of \$22,050 for a family of four and \$18,310 for a family of three (see table).

2009 Poverty Guidelines¹

Persons in Family or Household	Annual Income
1	\$10,830
2	\$14,570
3	\$18,310
4	\$22,050

There is a very high prevalence of food insecurity and hunger among those receiving emergency food. We define “food insecurity” as a household’s inability to meet the basic food needs of its members. Of those clients interviewed at food pantries, 81 percent were food insecure; 40 percent experienced hunger.

Recipients of emergency food suffer from a host of economic hardships. In one-fifth of client households, an adult was laid off during the past year and remained unemployed. When asked about their ability to afford food and other necessities, 41 percent of client households explained that they have such limited income that they must choose between paying for food and paying their rent; 43 percent had to decide whether to pay for food or pay their utility bills. These findings are consistent with other research showing that low-income families without subsidized housing² or fuel-assistance³ are at high risk for under-nutrition and hunger.



In 2009, 57 percent of client households in Rhode Island were enrolled in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program). This is a large increase from the last

Results of the Rhode Island Study *(continued)*

Hunger in America study conducted in 2006. At that time, only 35 percent received these government benefits.⁴ This improvement reflects the success of the SNAP Outreach Project at the University of Rhode Island's Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America that conducts outreach at emergency food programs, identifying eligible families and encouraging them to enroll. However, in 2009, SNAP recipients were still in need of emergency food because their benefits, on average, were exhausted after just two weeks of shopping for groceries each month.

The study also found that families with children and minority group members are over-represented at emergency food sites as compared to the state's population. Among clients at food pantries, 41 percent had children at home, whereas just 30 percent of all households in Rhode Island are families with children. In terms of race, 16 percent of emergency food program users were Non-Hispanic Black, 35 percent identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino and 43 percent were Non-Hispanic White. By comparison, the overall population of Rhode Island is six percent Non-Hispanic Black, 12 percent Hispanic/Latino and 89 percent Non-Hispanic White.



Results from the survey of agency directors confirmed that emergency food programs in Rhode Island are serving more people than in the past. Among food pantry directors, 83 percent reported serving more clients now than three years ago, as did 75 percent of soup kitchen directors. The strain on these programs is apparent with 68 percent of all agency directors stating that funding or other issues threaten their continued operation.

Implications of the Research



Over 50,000 Rhode Islanders turn to emergency food programs for help each month. By and large, they are living in poverty, dealing with severe financial hardships and facing hunger. The economic recession has made matters worse for many households, increasing the demand for emergency food assistance and stretching the capacity of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its member agencies.

To keep this statewide network intact, we must help more eligible people access government sponsored nutrition programs, including SNAP. Fortunately, President Obama and Congress increased SNAP benefit amounts as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This will boost the buying power of low-

income families in the supermarket. Now, Rhode Island must hire more state workers to keep up with the influx of new SNAP applicants and streamline the enrollment process. More SNAP users mean more federal dollars for Rhode Island.

As Hunger in America shows, emergency food programs provide critical hunger relief. But to meet the basic food needs of the thousands of Rhode Islanders now in financial crisis, we must help them enroll in federal nutrition programs that can provide on-going assistance. Since SNAP is a major source of federal revenue for Rhode Island, enrolling every eligible household should be a key part of the state's strategy for economic renewal.

¹2009 Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines, Federal Register, 2009.

²Rx for Hunger: Affordable Housing, Children's HealthWatch, 2009.

³Frank, D. et al., *Heat or Eat: The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and Nutritional and Health Risks among Children Less than 3 Years of Age*, Pediatrics, 2006.

⁴Hunger in America 2006: State Report Prepared for Rhode Island, Mathematica Policy Research, 2006.