

HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY

The status of families in Kenosha Unified School District elementary schools

Food security refers to the assured access to sufficient food for a healthy and active life.

Food insecure families may worry about not having enough food, eat inadequate foods, or skip meals due to lack of money.

At its most severe level, food insecurity can be described as **hunger**.

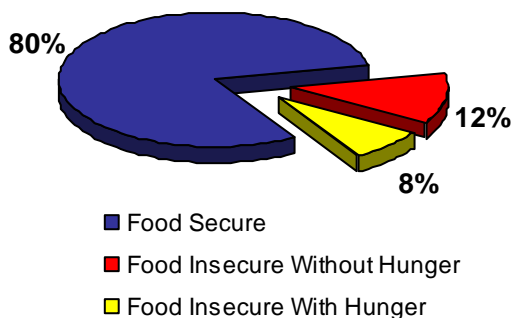
We know that hunger is a real problem for Wisconsin families. Nearly half a million people in Wisconsin live in households that are *food insecure* – they do not always have enough food for an active, healthy life.¹ This means that 1 out of every 12 households is food insecure. Food insecurity in Wisconsin occurs in all types of households, but is more common among households that are poor, and in households headed by a single mother or a minority. Among all Wisconsin households with elementary school children, approximately 12% are food insecure.²

Little is known about how food insecurity varies within the state. However, it would be useful for particular counties, communities, or schools to find out if they have a high or low food insecurity rate.

The University of Wisconsin-Extension, and the students, parents, teachers and administrators Kenosha Unified School District elementary schools collaborated on a survey research project³ to find out the food security status of local families and to learn more about how local families get their food. Our findings include:

Hunger and Food Insecurity

Almost one-fifth (20%) of families that responded to the survey are classified as food insecure, based on their responses to a series of questions. This includes 8% of families that experienced hunger in the past year. Although we cannot make precise comparisons to statewide rates⁴, food insecurity appears to be more prevalent among families with elementary school children in the Kenosha Unified School District than among families with elementary school children statewide. Research shows that food insecurity among children is linked to a variety of problems, such as lower test scores, increased absences and more frequent behavioral and health problems.



Which families have the greatest risk?

Food insecurity is more common among low income households, although it occurs at all income levels. Survey results show that 34% of families responding are poor or near-poor (that is, they have incomes below 185% of the poverty line). 46% of these households are food insecure, as compared to 7% of remaining households.

Survey results also show that households headed by a single mother have a greater risk of food insecurity than do other households. 45% of such households are food insecure, as compared to 14% of households headed by a couple. Households that rent their home are also at high risk—42% are food insecure, as compared to 11% of home owners.

¹ Nord, Mark. 2003. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing 1999-2001 data from the U.S. Census Bureau's current Population Survey.

² Nord, Mark. 2004. U.S. Department of Agriculture. Personal communication citing 2000-2002 data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

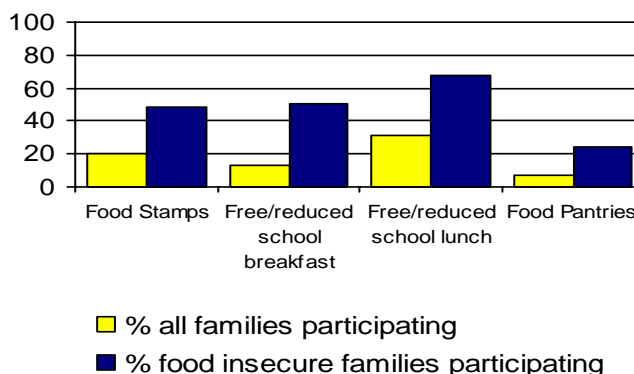
³ Based on a take home survey completed by 3946 families in 26 elementary schools in the School District of Kenosha. 53% of families returned a survey. We cannot know for sure how accurate our results are in describing all households, since some households did not return a survey. However, the reported rates of participation in free and reduced price meals are similar to the official rates for the schools. We expect, therefore, that our sample is reasonably representative of the district.

⁴ It is not possible to compare this directly to the state as a whole, because statewide estimates are based on a different survey method (phone surveys) and a different time period (2000-2002).

Food insecurity is not limited to the unemployed. In fact, 87% of all food insecure households report at least one worker in the household, including 77% with at least one fulltime worker.

Participation in Nutrition Assistance Programs

Low income families may be eligible for a variety of nutrition assistance programs that can help provide food. Based on the income reported by respondents, some families appear to be missing out on programs for which they may qualify. 20% of all families report that they received food stamps in the past year, while an additional 8% appear to be eligible but did not participate⁵. 31% of families say that their child(ren) received free or reduced price school lunch in the past year; an additional 8% appear to be eligible. Among families whose child attended a school that offered breakfast, 28% reported their child receiving breakfast at free or reduced price, and an additional 26% of children at participating schools appear to be eligible. Finally, 7% of families received food from a food pantry, church, or similar place in the past year. As shown in the figure, the majority of food insecure families do not participate in food assistance programs.



Breakfast on School Days

Eating breakfast has been shown to improve classroom attention and academic achievement. Yet, 19% of parents say their child typically skips breakfast at least once during the school week. Breakfast is served in 15 of the 26 schools that participated in this survey. Among parents whose child usually doesn't eat school breakfast even though it is available, 77% say their child prefers eating at home in the morning, 45% say their child does not get to school in time for breakfast, 32% say breakfast at home is more healthy, 25% are not familiar with the program, 17% say their child does not like the school breakfast, and 15% say the school breakfast period is too short.

What Can Be Done?

There are some things that can be done to help food insecure families.

- ❖ Identify and address barriers to food stamp program participation.
- ❖ Explore options for offering breakfast at more of the schools, and or promoting breakfast participation when the program is offered.
- ❖ Contact local food pantries to determine need for additional food.
- ❖ Help build awareness of hunger in the community.

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

For More Information

For complete results of the survey or for more information, contact Rory Klick, Food Security and Hunger Prevention Coordinator, Kenosha County UW-Extension, rklick@co.kenosha.wi.us. For a food security profile of Kenosha County, visit the Wisconsin Food Security Project website at: <http://www1.uwex.edu/ces/flp/cfs>

⁵ Eligibility is estimated based on reported income and household size. However, the eligibility rules for food stamps are complex, and some families that meet the income limits might still not qualify.