

WHEN CHILDREN GO HUNGRY

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HUNGRY CHILDREN – What It Means

Few people would consider it right to have a child go hungry, though odds are, many do not consider the implications of such hunger beyond the discomfort of a growling stomach. However, the cumulative consequences of children growing up without proper nourishment are much more far-reaching and serious. Not only does the lack of proper nutrition lead to poor health, it also limits children's long-term cognitive and socio-emotional development. In recent years, food insecurity and hunger have become problems faced by an increasing number of children, strongly impacting the health, academic performance, and employability of an entire generation.

The impacts of child hunger and lack of proper nutrition roughly fall into three categories, though each is intimately linked with the others: health, academic performance, and workforce.

Health: Food insecurity is an integral part of a lifecycle fraught with negative outcomes, starting its influence on a child's health as early as during pregnancy. The health of an infant is strongly affected by the diet of his or her mother during gestation. When a mother lacks access to enough nutritious food during pregnancy, there is an increased risk of the baby being born at low birth weight, or even dying in infancy. It can adversely affect an infant's long-term health, growth, and development trajectories by affecting a fetus's physical systems, thus increasing the risk of a baby being born with cognitive and physical impairments.

Further, food insecure children suffer from slow growth, deficiency diseases, and reduced immune function, as well as early onset

Definitions

FOOD INSECURITY: Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies), leading to poorer food choices as well as reduced food intake for adults.

HUNGER: The most severe form of food insecurity, where there is not enough food for adults or children in the family. The recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food.

American Institute of Nutrition; Montana Food Bank Network

of diseases like Type II diabetes. Malnutrition in early infancy through age 3, a critical time of brain and central nervous system development, inhibits cognitive development and, by extension, learning ability.

Ironically, child food insecurity is also linked to child obesity through a complex network of underlying processes. Primarily, food insecurity tends to result

in a diet that is low both in quality and variety. Healthy foods are often more expensive, while refined grains and added sugars and fats are relatively inexpensive. In households where resources are limited, food budgets can be stretched by purchasing cheap but energy-dense foods, sacrificing quality for quantity in order to stave off hunger. The resulting overconsumption of calories is linked to obesity. Furthermore, the unpredictability of food access associated with food insecurity often leads to periodic overeating. Those who eat less or skip meals to stretch food budgets may overeat when food does become available. Such chronic ups and downs in food intake contribute to overweight in and of itself, but it can also lead to metabolic changes that promote fat storage. Additionally, experiencing high levels of chronic

Murphy, p5

stress due to food insecurity and other stressors associated with living in or near poverty may trigger anxiety and depression in children, both of which are associated with child obesity.

Academic Performance: Children who come to school hungry have problems learning, show reduced comprehension ability, and have lower-than-average math and reading test scores. As such, hungry children are in need of special education services at a higher rate than their non-hungry peers and are also more likely to have to repeat grades. Special education services cost nearly double the average annual amount it takes to educate a child. If a child also has to repeat one or more grades, the cost of his or her education can easily be four times that of a child who does not need special education nor repeats a grade.

In a school setting, hungry children often “feel sick, tired, cranky, or bored; fight with classmates and get in trouble with teachers; feel anxious or unable to concentrate; [and] suffer from poor health, weakened immune systems, and increased hospitalizations”

“...inadequate nutritional intake, associated with incomes too low to maintain a healthy diet, exacts a serious toll. [It] can impede cognitive development and impair [children’s] capacities over a lifetime. For youngsters whose natural abilities and talents are diminished, the cost is obvious. But the cost also extends to our nation in terms of higher rates of school failure, poorer returns on our educational investments, and weakened workforce productivity when children reach the age of employment.”

Center on Hunger and Poverty, p3

(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010 p. 20). Poor nutrition and hunger leads to behavior problems in the classroom, more disciplinary actions, and an inability to have normal interactions with other students. When food insecurity inhibits a child's functioning in the form of hyperactivity and disruptive behavior, the child's entire class is affected. Consequently, not only does food insecurity increase the cost of a hungry child's education, it can also be detrimental to the education of his or her classmates. Although poverty alone puts a child at risk of behavioral problems, the additional burden of food insecurity has been shown to increase these problems. Research indicates that low-income, hungry children show higher levels of anxiety, irritability, aggression, and oppositional behaviors than their equally poor, but non-hungry, peers.

Workforce: A child who experiences hunger, especially starting at an early age, is disadvantaged upon entering school and continues to be so throughout his or her school years, resulting in poor grades or even early school drop-out. Workers who experienced hunger as children are not as well prepared physically, mentally, or socially to perform effectively in today's workforce. Poor academic outcomes in high school reduce the ability for children to seek higher education or to learn a trade or skill that will lead them to jobs that pay well and economic self-sufficiency as adults. Instead of becoming future leaders and innovators, children who start their lives hungry end up imposing significant costs to

national and state economies in terms of health care costs, education costs, unemployment benefits, and welfare programs, not to mention the loss of human capital. They depend on public assistance rather than becoming tax payers who contribute to society. In recent years, food insecurity and hunger have become problems faced by an increasing number of children, strongly impacting the health, academic performance, and employability of an entire generation.

SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Today, school-based nutrition programs serve as important safety nets for the country's children. The first such program appeared in 1946 when President Harry S. Truman authorized the *National School*



“Human capital theory, developed and articulated by Gary Becker in the early 1960s, is one very useful framework for considering the economic consequences of childhood food insecurity. Elaborated by a host of economists since, the theory envisions the unique capabilities and expertise of individuals as a stock of ‘human capital,’ useful to individuals and firms as an input into desirable work and activity. A person’s human capital stock is a primary determinant of the kinds of employment they can successfully compete for, their consequent earning capacity, and lifetime earnings. ... From conception until death, each person undergoes a continuous process of human capital formation and destruction. Early developmental periods...are critical in determining a person’s potential for human capital formation later in life. Circumstances that impair or interfere with health, growth and development during these periods can have lasting negative impacts on human capital formation throughout life.”

Murphy, p6

Lunch Act in part in response to claims that many American men had been rejected for military service during World War II due to diet-related health problems. The act was also intended to keep food prices high, absorbing post-war commodity surpluses by providing food for school-age children. Section 2 of the Act defines its purpose: “It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food, by assisting the States, through grants—in aid and other means, in providing an adequate supply of food and other facilities for the establishment, maintenance, operation and expansion of nonprofit school lunch programs.”

In 1970, an average day saw 22 million children being served lunch at school, about one-fifth of them being free or at reduced price (subsidized). Today, the program feeds nutritionally balanced lunches to an average of 32 million

children in 101,000 schools and residential childcare institutions each school day. Of these, 21 million meals, or two-thirds, are subsidized.

In Montana, 38 percent of school children were enrolled to receive free/reduced-price lunch during the 2010-11 school year. The number represents more than 62,500 school children whose families cannot afford to adequately feed them while also paying for other necessities such as rent and utilities each month. The total number of qualifying children is certainly higher as there are children whose families are not aware that they qualify, or who choose not to enroll. In an effort to address the former barrier, starting in 2004 Congress required school districts to match student enrollment lists against local SNAP enrollment and automatically enrolling those who receive food stamps in the school lunch program. The number of districts complying with this requirement is growing.

With free/reduced-price meals provided to students throughout the state, Montana’s school-age children have

Poverty and Food Insecurity Statistics, 2010

Overall poverty rate	15%
Child poverty rate	20%
Children at risk of food insecurity	22%
Number of children	47,800
Minimum household income to escape food insecurity (4-person household)	\$41,350
Equivalent poverty level	185%
Median household income for 4-person household in Montana	\$42,666

Source:
Feeding America, U.S. Census Bureau

Thrifty Family Budget

	Year	Month
Rent & utilities	\$7,632	\$636
Child care	\$12,984	\$1,082
Health insurance, medical expenses	\$4,414	\$368
Food	\$6,401	\$533
Other expenses	\$9,919	\$827
Total household budget	\$41,350	\$3,446

Note: Budget for 4-person family
Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture; National Center for Children in Poverty

a source of nutritiously balanced food, at least while in school. However, lunch five days a week cannot provide a growing child with adequate nutrition, nor can it keep their bellies full during the times of the day when children

are not in school. The implications for the learning process are undeniable. In the words of one teacher who has concluded she only has two effective days to teach each week: “Mondays and Tuesdays are lost because of the hunger from the weekend, and on Fridays most of the students can’t concentrate because they are filled with anxiety and aggravation, knowing the weekend is coming and that means not enough food at home.”

“[F]amilies with limited incomes and resources will take care of expenses that cannot be delayed in order to provide shelter, transportation, and other daily needs. Food is usually the last item in their limited budget and the money remaining may not be enough to meet the family’s food needs.”

MFBN, p2

An increasing number of schools are now providing free/reduced-price breakfasts in addition to their lunch offerings. The School Breakfast Program was established as part of the *Child Nutrition Act of 1966*, authorized under Lyndon B. Johnson, who stated that, “Good nutrition is essential to good learning.” Over the course of the past five years, the total number of lunches served in Montana schools has increased by a mere 4 percent, while the total number of school breakfasts served has gone up by 17 percent. Additionally, while 57 percent of Montana school lunches are subsidized, 79 percent of school breakfasts are. Still, the number of school breakfasts served is only about one-third of the number of lunches served.

One reason for this disproportionate participation is the stigma associated with standing out as “free breakfast kids.” Another reason is the difficulty of getting to school early enough to eat in the cafeteria before school starts. Breakfast may be served too early for children to make it if they rely on the bus to get to school. The majority of teachers in schools that serve breakfast favors providing breakfast in the classroom instead of in the cafeteria and serving it to all children—thus eliminating both barriers at once. In Montana schools that provide Breakfast In the Classroom (BIC), the meal is offered to all students, unless a student’s parents explicitly opts out.

The *Child Nutrition Act* was reauthorized in 2010 as the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010* (HHFKA) and put the nation’s schools on the front lines in the challenge to feed our children and to feed them better. HHFKA authorized funding for federal school meals and child nutrition programs and increased access to healthy food for low-income children, while including \$4.5 billion in new funding for these programs over the next 10 years.

COMMUNITY-BASED NUTRITION PROGRAMS

Children aren’t hungry only during school hours or on school days, and providing meals for children during evenings, weekends, and school vacations is a different matter. To address children’s hunger during these times, different schools and groups in communities across the state and across the country provide a range of services, though it is important to note that these services are often local efforts undertaken by local organizations and not necessarily supported by state or federal funds.

At the national level, some schools in districts with extremely high school lunch participation rates (exceeding 80 percent) have started free supper programs in addition

to school breakfast and lunch, serving students an afternoon meal when classes end to prevent children from going to bed hungry. After-school programs such as the Boys' & Girls' Club and Missoula's Flagship Program provide afternoon snacks for the children in their care (attendance is free). The Backpack Program, a model in use across the country and sponsored by the Montana Food Bank Network in a handful of locations in Montana, provides children with nutritious and easy-to-prepare food to take home on weekends and school vacations, when school-based meals and after-school snacks are not available. Additionally, many summer programs for children, such as YMCA summer day camps, include lunch and sometimes breakfast in their offerings, and many communities have established summer food distribution sites where children can simply show up and receive a free, nutritious sack lunch—no questions asked. However, the number of children who participate in the school-based summer school program totals a mere 11 percent of the children who participate in the free/reduced-price lunch program throughout the school year.

HUNGRY IN MONTANA

These days, food insecurity and hunger are not affecting just the unemployed. An increasing number of people have slipped into poverty due to the current economic recession. Many more families are experiencing under-employment, reduced working hours, and being forced to work several jobs to get by, as well as the multiple other social-emotional stressors that are associated with poverty. Simply “getting by” has become more and more difficult as the unemployment rate climbs, along with gas prices, food prices, child care costs, medical costs, and housing costs. Especially for

households with children, “getting by” requires making significant sacrifices in terms of the trade-offs involved to pay for a family's most basic needs. For parents, this also includes going to great lengths to ensure their children have enough to eat, including skipping or cutting the size of their own meals.

Montana poverty rates have increased across the state during recent years. Although the state has avoided the brunt of the recent recession, the overall poverty rate rose from 13 percent in 2007 to 15 percent in 2010. Poverty rates for children are higher than for the overall population, increasing from 17 percent in 2006 to 20 percent in 2010. However, living in outright poverty is one thing. According to the U.S.

Department of Agriculture,

food insecurity and

hunger is a very

real risk until a

household reaches

185 percent

of the Federal

Poverty Line.

Such an income

is equivalent to an

annual income of

\$41,350 for a family

of four; the median

income for households of

all sizes was \$42,666 in Montana

in 2010. According to *Feeding America's* Map the Meal

Gap data, 14 percent of Montanans fell below 185%

FPL in 2009, putting them at risk of food insecurity

and hunger, while 22 percent of Montana children, or

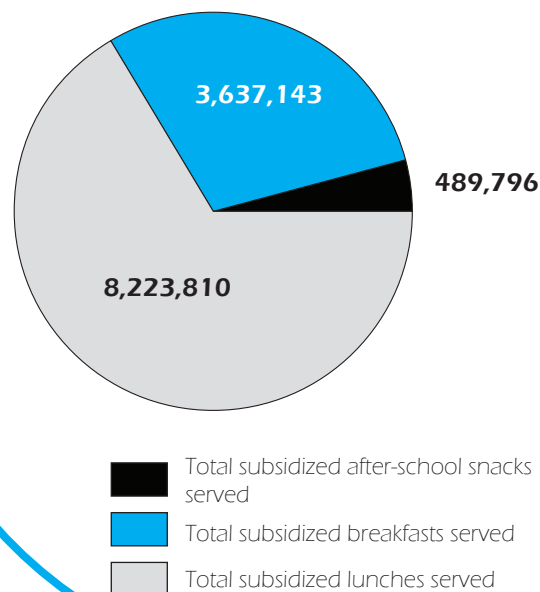
close to 47,800 kids, fell into this category.

THE THRIFTY FOOD PLAN

The Thrifty Food Plan is the USDA's estimate of what it costs to purchase a minimally-adequate diet. The Thrifty Food Plan is the least expensive market basket of food the government prices – and recommends for short-term use only. It serves as the basis for SNAP allotments.

The USDA calculates the costs of a variety of food plans throughout the year, the Thrifty Food Plan being the lowest-cost option. The food included in this meal plan for a family of four (two adults and two children under age 5) in 2011 was estimated at \$123 per week, assuming the family would always cook at home. Using estimates for Montana developed by the National Center for Children in Poverty, over the course of one year this family would spend \$7,632 on rent and utilities, \$12,984 on childcare and \$4,414 on health insurance and medical expenses. If they also adhere to the low-cost food plan, they would spend an additional \$6,401 on food annually. If the family's income is at 185% FPL, or \$41,350, they will be left with a total of \$9,919 for all other expenses for the year. That's \$827 per month for expenses such as transportation, clothes, household and personal hygiene products, etc. No matter how frugal a family is, just one unbudgeted expense will leave them without money to buy essentials.

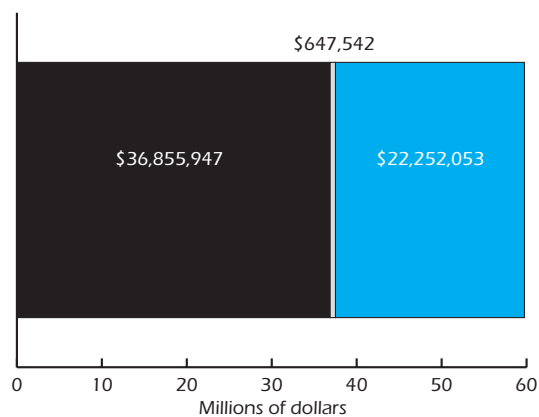
Subsidized meals served, Montana, 2010-11 School Year



SOLUTIONS: Temporary Fixes

For years, private response to hunger and food insecurity has been to help families once they're already hungry, with the first food bank in America established in 1967 in Phoenix, Arizona. In Montana, the Food Bank Network was founded in 1983, and by 2010 its partner agencies of food banks and food pantries were serving 175,000 people around the state. This network of food distribution outlets, either on the national or the state level, was never designed to be a permanent solution to hunger in America. It is increasingly evident that the temporary help in the form of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens, originally intended to address inadequate access, have become institutionalized in communities across the state and the country. As charitable as these institutions are and as important as they are to the families who rely on them to get basic food needs met, they are not an adequate long-term solution to the bigger problem of

Meal Funding Sources, Montana, 2010-11 School Year



- Local school meal support*
- State school meals matching funds
- Federal school meals reimbursements

economic instability, labor market vagaries, and family or individual dysfunctionality.

SOLUTIONS: Long-Term Response

Level of personal income and economic security are closely tied to food insecurity and both child and adult hunger. With wage and job losses becoming commonplace, and the jobless staying unemployed for longer periods, it is increasingly difficult to elevate a family's personal income to the point where its members can comfortably afford to purchase nutritious food. Thus efforts to alleviate child hunger should be focused in two specific categories: improving existing prevention programs and improving existing safety nets.

Prevention: To ensure proper child development and avoid long-term societal costs, preventive tools are critical. Funding programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly the Food Stamp Program) costs substantially less than paying for the negative consequences of hunger later. Primarily federally funded, these programs have proven themselves to be successful and cost-effective, as they not only manage to

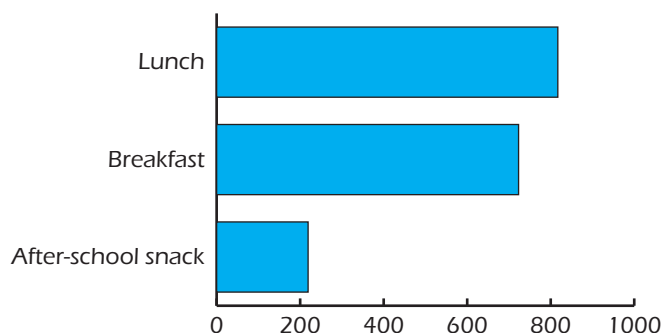
feed hungry children, but provide significant returns on investment as well, in the form of reduced Medicaid costs and increased local economic activity. Additionally, the programs contribute to future cost savings in the form of reduced health expenses for mothers and children. By expanding the reach and eligibility requirements of WIC and SNAP, the preventive benefits can reach not only the very poor, but also the working poor who often find themselves just beyond qualifying for either program.

Safety Net: Failing prevention, school-based meals provide a wide-reaching net that has the potential to catch virtually all children who lack sufficient nutrition at home. While the school lunch is firmly established, functional breakfast, snack, and weekend/vacation food programs will have far-reaching benefits for children in Montana and in the rest of the country. Extensive literature exists on how to minimize the social stigma associated with receiving subsidized meals, and increased state- or federal-based funding will ensure a more uniform approach to meals, as well as allow for more meals to be available to students throughout the day, week, and year.

SOLUTIONS IN ACTION

Under the two umbrellas, *Prevention* and *Safety Net*, efforts to end child hunger can be initiated at all levels. The following ideas were inspired in part by the USDA Food & Nutrition Service's "Ending Child Hunger" online resource center. By feeding hungry children, or keeping them from becoming hungry in the first place, we are not only doing the right thing from a moral perspective, we are also protecting the future of our children, our workforce, our economy and our country.

**Participating Schools,
Montana, 2010-11 School Year**





What can you do?

If you are a member of STATE GOVERNMENT, you can:

- Facilitate the fight against child hunger at the local level by maintaining stable program rules and requirements, and streamlining paperwork;
- Use state and local media outlets to create awareness of the child hunger issue; and
- Create local-level challenges to increase participation in federal programs.

If you are a FUNDER (corporation, foundation, individual), you can:

- Fund activities at after-school programs and summer food sites to attract more children (contact your local school district or school; a state directory can be found at www.opi.mt.gov/Resources/Directory/Index.html); and
- Support infrastructure used to alleviate hunger, such as purchasing refrigerated trucks for food transportation (contact local food pantries to learn their needs; contact information for pantries around the state can be found at www.mfbn.org/partner/citymap).

If you are a VOLUNTEER or part of a CIVIC GROUP, you can:

- Become a sponsoring organization for after-school or summer sites (contact your local school district or school; a state directory can be found at www.opi.mt.gov/Resources/Directory/Index.html); and
- Assist anti-hunger organizations (SNAP, summer food sites, etc.) in ensuring access for all eligible people. Suggested points of contact include the Public Assistance Bureau at DPHHS (406-444-9022), local school districts (www.opi.mt.gov/Resources/Directory/Index.html), and local food pantries (www.mfbn.org/partner/citymap).

If you are part of the GENERAL PUBLIC, you can:

- Donate money to anti-hunger causes, such as the Montana Partnership to End Childhood Hunger;
- Support local food pantries through direct donations or through volunteering your time (www.mfbn.org/partner/citymap); and
- Donate to local food drives, or consider organizing one in your community (contact the Food Bank Network at 800-809-4752 for more information).

If you represent a SCHOOL, a PTA or if you are a PARENT, you can:

- Contact principals at local schools to encourage school participation in the Summer Food Service Program, or to offer assistance (www.opi.mt.gov/Resources/Directory/Index.html);
- Help sponsor a Summer Food Service Program, or after-school meals and snacks (find contact information for local school districts at www.opi.mt.gov/Resources/Directory/Index.html);
- Contact your state representatives to bring legislative attention to the child hunger issue (find how to reach your representative at <http://leg.mt.gov/css/Sessions/62nd/roster.asp?HouseID=0&SessionID=105>).

The Montana Partnership to End Childhood Hunger was formed following a “Hunger Summit” convened in Helena in the fall of 2010 by the Food Security Council and the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). 65 people from state and local government, agencies, service providers, and organizations gathered to brainstorm ideas to end childhood hunger in their communities. Together they generated 10 Steps to Ending Childhood Hunger in Montana (below), which have since been published jointly by OPI, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, and the Food Security Council—Montana Food Bank Network.

10 Steps to Ending Childhood Hunger in Montana

1. Provide a nutrient-rich breakfast for all school children.
2. Provide nutrient-rich meals for Montana children during out-of-school times.
3. Expand the reach of Summer Food Service Program in Montana.
4. Support nutrient-rich snacks and supper meals in Montana’s after-school programs and childcare centers.
5. Guarantee that all eligible Montana families have access to public food programs.
6. Increase access for Montana families to healthy, affordable food.
7. Ensure healthy eating for pregnant women and support breastfeeding for new mothers.
8. Improve adequacy and quality of food donations to Montana food pantries, banks, and shelters.
9. Offer nutrition education to Montana children and families on making smart food choices and active lifestyles.
10. Improve the economic security of Montana’s working families.



Online

- Montana Food Bank Network's Food Security Council, www.mfbn.org/fsc
- Food Research and Action Center, www.frac.org
- United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, www.usda.gov
- Feeding America, feedingamerica.org
- No Kid Hungry/Share Our Strength, www.nokidhungry.org
- Let's Move - Eat Healthy, www.letsmove.gov/eat+healthy

Books and Publications

- The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls
- Reading, Writing and Hungry: The consequences of food insecurity on children, and on our nation's success by Carolyn Murphy and others for The Partnership for America's Economic Success
- Household Food Security in the United States in 2010 by Alisha Coleman-Jensen and others for the USDA Economic Research Service

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