**Hungry in Montana**

An increasing number of people in Montana are living on the financial edge, where even a small change in a family situation can cause an immediate plunge into poverty. Such changes range from the loss of employment or reduced working hours to illnesses, accidents, or death. With hunger and income undeniably connected, the recent economic climate has tipped many people over the edge to poverty through either unemployment or under-employment. Food insecurity and hunger are not affecting just the unemployed but the growing numbers of the working poor as well. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food insecurity and hunger are a very real risk for anyone living below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (equivalent to an annual income of $41,350 for a family of four), thus affecting more than 40 percent of Montanans in 2010. Food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens, originally intended to address inadequate access to food on a temporary basis, have become institutionalized in communities across the state and the country.

Simply “getting by” has become more and more difficult for some as the unemployment rate has climbed, along with gas prices, food prices, 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. Against this backdrop, the importance of school meals becomes obvious (Bradford, 2008).

**School-Based Meals**

With free or reduced-price meals provided to public-school students throughout the state, Montana’s children have a source of nutritious food, at least while in school. However, lunch five days a week cannot provide growing children with adequate nutrition, nor can it keep them from being hungry during the times of the day when children are not in school. The implications for the learning process are undeniable. One first grade teacher in Washington, D.C., Erica Rose, has concluded that she has only two effective days to teach each week.

“Mondays and Tuesdays are lost because of the hunger from the weekend,” according to Rose. “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.”

**Food Insecurity:** Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways.

**Hunger:** The condition where both adults and children cannot access food consistently and have to reduce food intake, eat poor diets, and often go without any food. Hunger is also defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food.

– Murphy p.5 and Bradford p.2
Kids’ Table Provides Summer Meals to Children

On an August afternoon in Missoula, children begin to congregate outside the Burns Street Square community center on the city’s west side. As the clock inches toward 2 p.m., a dozen kids sit on the grass or meander along the sidewalk, waiting for Kelsey Baldwin to arrive and start the day’s Boys and Girls Club activity. They await something else, too – an afternoon snack.

Moments after Baldwin arrives, the kids dash inside and cluster around pool and foosball tables. Almost immediately, the Missoula Food Bank’s Erin Foster West arrives with an armload of granola bars, wheat crackers, and cheese sticks. Apples come in next. Minutes later, Baldwin hands out the afternoon’s first snack – yogurt cups and milk – before the group heads to a nearby park.

Thus begins another afternoon for “Kids’ Table.”

West is the Food Bank’s Program Services Coordinator. A decade ago, the Food Bank created Kids’ Table as a way to bring summer meals to school-age children, especially kids who qualified for free or reduced-price breakfasts or lunches at school. “We know a lot of kids are in those programs at their schools,” West said. “But during summer, they may not get those meals. At the same time, their families are challenged during the summer – by things like child care and travel – that make it difficult to supplement the food budget.”
Most schools offer free or reduced-price lunch, and many also offer breakfast. However, the latter programs tend to have lower participation: Not only are children reluctant to stand out as “free breakfast kids,” they also have difficulty getting to school early enough to eat in the cafeteria before school starts. School breakfasts are usually served too early for children to make it if they take the bus to school (Food Nutrition and Action Center, 2010). In schools that serve breakfast, the majority of K-8 teachers favor moving the breakfast to the classroom and serving it to all children, thus eliminating both the stigma issue and the logistical issue of early school arrival (Share Our Strength, 2010).

Meals during evenings, weekends, and school vacations are a different matter. To address children’s hunger during these times, different groups in communities across the state provide a range of services, though it is important to note that these services are local efforts, undertaken by local organizations, without support from state or federal government.

After-school programs such as 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 available in a handful of locations in the state, 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. Summer vacation may seem like a golden expanse of time to many, but to children in food-insecure households, that expanse of time also means the absence of two guaranteed meals and a snack every weekday, as well as weekends without a secure source of food. Many summer programs for children include lunch, and sometimes breakfast, in their offerings (such as the YMCA summer day camps), and some communities have established summer food distribution sites where children can simply show up and receive a free, nutritious sack lunch – no questions asked.

“\n\textit{For young children, food insecurity can threaten survival; impair growth and development; lead to illness, poor health, and psychosocial problems; and impair the full development of human potential. These consequences carry significant costs for individuals, families, society, and the national economy.}”
\textit{– Murphy, p. 5}\n
Local Schools Host Summer Lunch Program

At C.M. Russell Elementary School, Leslie Hiller waits in the main hallway. Long tables with built-in seats stretch down the hall, while a large commercial cooler hums in a corner, filled with sack lunches. Shortly after 11 a.m., two teenage girls walk in the front door. “Hey, would you like some lunch?” Hiller asks. Thus begins another day of Russell’s Summer Food Service Program, a federally-funded meal service administered through Montana’s Office of Public Instruction.

Russell is one of five Missoula schools that host Summer Food sites. On an average day, Hiller hands out about 100 lunches; on peak days that number doubles. “I’ve had a day with 210 this summer,” Hiller said. “Those big days really showcase the economic necessity of the program.”

During part of the summer, Russell also hosts meals for homeless kids in the WORD summer camp. That means Hiller’s Friday tasks include offering WORD campers weekend food backpacks from Kids’ Table. However, even that can’t keep hunger from returning. “Those kids come in on Monday and they’re ravenous,” Hiller said. “They just have that flat expression on their faces. Then they get that meal in them, and their whole attitude changes.”

Consequences of Hunger

Food insecurity is an integral part in a life cycle fraught with negative outcomes. While few people would consider it a beneficial situation to have children go hungry, there are also few people who consider the consequences of such hunger beyond a growling stomach.
**Bringing Hunger Issues to the Forefront of Public Policy**

The Montana Office of Public Instruction and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services have partnered with the Montana Food Bank Network to bring the child hunger issue to the forefront of public policy. In September 2010, these organizations led a Childhood Hunger Summit that resulted in a 10-step plan to end child hunger:

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 the Summer Food Service Program in Montana.
4. Support nutrient-rich snack and supper meals in Montana’s after-school programs and child care 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.
10. Improve the economic security of Montana’s working families.

Food insecurity affects a child as early as during pregnancy as the health of an infant is strongly affected by the diet of his or her mother during gestation. Lack of access to enough nutritious food during pregnancy increases the risk of babies 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 developing fetus’ physical systems, increasing the risk of a baby being born with cognitive and physical impairments (Murphy, 2008).

For children, growing up without proper nourishment puts them at an early disadvantage on multiple fronts relative to their peers, as poor health limits children’s long-term cognitive and socio-emotional development. Ultimately, a child who is experiencing food insecurity runs the risk of impaired school achievement as a result of suffering from hyperactivity, absenteeism, generally poor behavioral and academic functioning. As such, children who experience food insecurity are more frequently in need of special education services at a higher rate than their non-hungry peers, and are also more likely to have to repeat a grade. Special education services cost nearly double the average annual cost of educating a child. If a child also has to repeat 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.

When food insecurity inhibits a child’s functioning in the form of hyperactivity and disruptive behavior, the child’s entire class can be affected. So 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. 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” (Casey Foundation, 2010).

Food insecurity in childhood has far-reaching consequences, some of which serve to perpetuate the problem of improper nutrition. 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 (Lee, 2008). Teen pregnancy is more common among school dropouts than among those with a high school diploma. Teen parents, and even parents in their 20s, without a high school education, will have difficulty finding work that pays wages high enough to provide proper nutrition for their children. The future health of the following generation is compromised before it is even born.
Prevention and Solutions

While the obvious solution to food insecurity and child hunger is to increase household incomes to the point where everyone has the funds to purchase enough nutritious food, such a solution is unfortunately too far-fetched to achieve in our day. However, we do have several tools at our disposal that have been proven to improve the nutritional intake of children. To ensure proper child development and avoid long-term societal costs, preventive tools become critical. Funding preventive programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps) costs substantially less than paying for the negative consequences later (Lee, 2008). Primarily federally funded, these programs have proven themselves to be successful and cost-effective, as they provide significant returns on investment in the form of reduced Medicaid costs and increased local economic activity, as well as future cost savings in the form of reduced health expenses for mothers and children. By expanding the reach and eligibility requirements of these two programs, the preventive benefits can reach not only the very poor, but also the working poor who often find themselves just beyond the reach of both SNAP and WIC.

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.

Feeding hungry children, or keeping them from becoming hungry in the first place, helps protect the future of our children, our workforce, and our economy.

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Sources


U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2010 Decennial Census, table DP03.